

# REIMAGINING SPORT COACHING:

**DESIGNING A SYSTEM THAT  
WORKS FOR WOMEN**



LEEDS  
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# Context for the Research

**STEPHANIE HILBORNE OBE, WOMEN IN SPORT**

Coaches are the backbone of sport, whether grassroots or high performance, putting their time and sometimes their lives into supporting other people to find the best in themselves, to be active, to find joy and, sometimes, to win medals or trophies. There are millions of people in the UK coaching in any one year, and approximately half are paid in some capacity even if only for an hour a week. Coaches are passionate, committed and love to coach. We should all be grateful for these innumerable coaches and their contribution to our society.

So, in these exciting times for women's sport with England's national teams flying high and girls and women looking for positive opportunities to play, the UK needs to similarly invest in supporting its coaching workforce. Sport depends on these passionate and driven people who step forward to coach. But an investment will only be effective if it is well targeted, so first we need to know what is happening. In particular, we need to find out why so few coaches at all levels are women and to understand the experience of coaches at every level in more depth. This is the purpose of this research.

There are two stories to tell and they are linked.

The first is of how it feels to coach in this country. Coaches, whether voluntary or paid, will understand that they may need to work in evenings and weekends, to travel and be away from their families. What few would predict is the sense of precarity, of opaque recruitment decisions, of paucity of support for development or progression and of the frequency of aggression and violence.

The message women coaches are receiving is that sport is men's business.

The second is of how it feels for a woman to coach in this country. For women, this informal and unclear environment is particularly challenging because coaching is so male-dominated. The gender stereotyping that associates sport with masculinity and which disassociates women from authority can combine to make the culture a hostile one. Women are less likely to get a tap on the shoulder when an opportunity arises, their competence is questioned simply because of their sex, and they often feel unheard and undervalued. For coaches who have families, the lack of a paternity policy is not good for men, but the lack of a maternity policy is impossible for women, and they suffer bullying and harassment at much higher rates.

Coaching is a key part of leadership in sport. And it is this leadership which remains the ultimate bastion of maleness in sport. In sport as in society, leadership is a corollary of power, and women in power are still all too often vilified, resented or unseated.

Cultural gender stereotyping is as old as the Greek myths when, in The Odyssey, Telemachus told his mother to go back to her loom because speech was the business of men,<sup>1</sup> and as recent as 2025 when Women in Sport's research showed that 45% of 13-24 year old females agreed "people think sport is for boys and doesn't matter for girls".<sup>2</sup>

All this makes it clear that there is a lot to do if we are to help more women (and more men) find their place in coaching, stay in coaching and have the positive experience they deserve.

**WOMEN IN SPORT'S RESEARCH SHOWED THAT 45% OF 13-24 YEAR OLD FEMALES AGREED "PEOPLE THINK SPORT IS FOR BOYS AND DOESN'T MATTER FOR GIRLS".<sup>2</sup>**

#### WHY DOES IT MATTER WHETHER WOMEN THRIVE IN COACHING?

##### **Female coaches are good for girls (and boys).**

First, female coaches are important to make sure girls and women have coaches who share their lived experience. Women in Sport research repeatedly shows that girls and women feel better understood by someone who shares their lived experience and that girls want more women in sport to look up to.<sup>2,3</sup> Female role models are especially important for girls who don't see themselves represented in sport, such as Black girls.<sup>4</sup> Around 930,000 fewer girls than boys play team sport in England<sup>5</sup> and half as many girls as boys dream of reaching the top of sport.<sup>2</sup> These are stark figures and having more women in the coaching workforce is one part of the solution. Research into young boys also shows that female coaches have an important impact on boys, helping to break down stereotypes and normalise women and girls in sport.<sup>6</sup> This ultimately has a positive effect on girls too, creating a more positive and supportive environment.

##### **It's only fair.**

Secondly, it is simply not right that women have less opportunity to thrive as coaches because of their sex. Men still dominate the wider leadership of sport taking up three quarters of the roles of Chair, CEO and Performance Director in the twenty most popular sports in England.<sup>7</sup> This sets the wider culture and maintains a power imbalance between the sexes, which is simply wrong. In coaching, a key part of leadership in sport, women fair even worse. Women have a right to parity of pay and recognition.



**It is flagrantly unjust to keep women out, by whatever unconscious means we do so, and we simply cannot afford to do without women's expertise."**

Mary Beard, Women & Power, 2017

##### **Female coaches can help us define this new era for coaching.**

UK Coaching's annual survey in 2024 reported significant differences in how male and female coaches see their roles.<sup>8</sup> Women coaches were much more likely to look at their role through a broad lens including the value of sport to self-esteem, health and wellbeing, activity levels and to build accessible sessions. Male coaches were heavily focused on helping with techniques, skills and drills and how to help people reach their goals. Both perspectives are vital if we are to achieve the culture change in coaching we seek.

<sup>1</sup> Beard, M. (2017) Women & Power: A Manifesto

<sup>2</sup> Women in Sport (2026) Let Her Dream 2025: The Rise of the Gender Dream Deficit in Sport

<sup>3</sup> Women in Sport (2024) Chasing the Olympic Dream: Closing the Dream Deficit in Sport

<sup>4</sup> Women in Sport (2025) Black Girls and Sport: A Breakup Story

<sup>5</sup> Sport England (2025) Active Lives Children and Young People Survey: Academic Year 2024-25

<sup>6</sup> Women in Sport (2024) 'Boys will be boys': Creating a New Generation of Male Allies for Girls in Sport

<sup>7</sup> Women in Sport (2025) Equal Leadership in Sport

<sup>8</sup> UK Coaching (2024) UK Coaching Population Study 2024 Report: Coaches

## THE CONTEXT: WOMEN, MISOGYNY, SPORT AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

We can't think about coaching in isolation from the reality of women's wider lives, our perceived place in society and the consequences for our relationship with sport. We are all inculcated with the misogynistic attitudes that exist in our society, so our expectations of, and response to men and women are often different. We are still unused to seeing women in leadership roles and positions of authority and we make it disproportionately hard for the women who are.

Nowhere is this clearer than in sport, and in coaching in particular. The sports coaching culture and expectations of coaches are based on decades of male athletes and male coaches on our screens and in our lives. Our perceptions of coaching are built into the fabric of society and are often not helpful for boys and men but are certainly not helpful for girls and women. For us to nurture women in coaching we must correct these negative cultural norms.

Women and girls are also still expected to carry an unfair and heavy burden of care and responsibility throughout their lives, conflicting with the anti-social hours of coaching and the potential for long periods away from home. This life experience has a direct effect on the likelihood of women feeling they can choose to pursue coaching, as a volunteer or employee. People around them are likely to judge them harshly for breaking with societal norms, even if it is to give to other people in their community, rather than care for their own children or parents. And because gender stereotyping inculcates in girls a heavy burden of responsibility, women are less likely to take short-term contracts, or to risk paying for an expensive qualification if the investment is unlikely to pay off.

For women who do push through these barriers and make it into the sporting system they often find a hostile culture. Male and female coaches face unacceptable aggression and violence but women report bullying and harassment on a much greater scale than men. Women are routinely undervalued in coaching leading to their missing out on jobs, being paid less and having less invested in their personal development. Gender bias means women are assumed to be less competent and expected to prove their capabilities where for men the opposite assumptions prevail.

The culture of coaching, the support, the flexibility, and the opportunities don't just need to be improved but there needs to be recognition that women are not starting on a level playing field in their daily lives. For coaching to be transformed and become a place where women can thrive as well as men, disproportionate effort needs to be made. As the Human Rights lawyer Baroness Kennedy has argued, "treating as equal those who are not yet equal furthers inequality." When people start from different positions, applying the same approach to everyone can reinforce existing disadvantage rather than remove it. This is why this report takes an equity-based approach: addressing structural barriers and unequal conditions is necessary if genuine equality in coaching is to be achieved.

## WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR?

The sport sector has been aware for a long time of the relative paucity of women coaches at all levels. There has also been growing awareness, beyond just female networks in sport, of the negative experiences many women coaches face.

National Governing Bodies have been part of this, with most recognising that only a small proportion of their coaches are female. But all too often the response has been to assume that women simply need skilling up. This could be due to gender bias which assumes women are not competent to coach, or an unwillingness to tackle the bigger cultural issues. As a result, dedicated female coaching programmes have been funded, but the reason these interventions have not shifted the dial in any significant way is that women are not the problem. The problem stems from deep-rooted challenges around them. That is not to say that women don't benefit from these programmes, but the reality is that if the environment and culture doesn't change outside of the programmes, the result will always be the same – women unable to get jobs or left to suffer in, or leave, often miserable environments.

It is vital that the sector avoids the presumption that the growing visibility of women's sport will sort the problem out. Paid coaching roles in any sport are highly sought after, so the more that is invested in women's sport the more attractive coaching roles in women's sport will become. Men will have the advantage over women for all the reasons above, but especially in sports where women were previously excluded so the potential pool of female coaches is consequently smaller. For example, only 4 of 18 of the managers in the 2025 Women's Rugby World Cup were women.

And this is why we teamed up with Leeds Beckett University to undertake this research at this vital moment for women's sport. Frustrated by this narrow response to the problem, our report seeks to provide an indisputably solid base of evidence and analysis about women in coaching. The aim is to give the sector the basis for tackling and remedying the real problems that are keeping women out of coaching. We believe it has the potential to help revolutionise coaching culture as a whole, because if we can fix the system for female coaches, male coaches will also thrive.

# About the Research

## PROFESSOR LEANNE NORMAN

This report brings clarity, evidence and urgency to one of the most persistent challenges in UK sport: the underrepresentation, undervaluation and uneven treatment of women in coaching. Despite increased visibility of women in sport, coaching remains one of the least gender-equal parts of the system. Women continue to be underrepresented across the pathway, including community and grassroots environments where most coaching takes place, and where a significant proportion of the workforce is voluntary, part-time or operating with limited organisational support. Most acutely, women are underrepresented in high-performance and leadership roles. Their experiences of progression, safety, workload, respect and trust reveal structural issues that traditional workforce conversations often overlook.

When women struggle to enter, stay or progress in coaching, it exposes deeper issues in how coaching is organised, supported and valued. These issues are not confined to women; they reflect wider weaknesses in system design that affect the workforce as a whole but are felt most acutely by women. Women's experiences therefore provide a clear signal of system health.

Women's experiences also point not only to internal system issues, but to the wider social and organisational forces that shape coaching work in practice. Coaching does not operate in isolation from society. It is shaped by wider norms relating to inequalities between the sexes, authority, credibility and care. The patterns identified in this report mirror broader societal inequities, but are intensified by sport's organisational cultures, informal practices and closed networks. Understanding coaching within this wider context is essential to any meaningful reform. At the same time, the evidence shows that coaching operates as a connected system of work. What happens in community and grassroots coaching shapes the talent pathway; pressures in the pathway affect readiness for high performance; and norms in high-performance environments cascade downwards. The system rises and falls together.

Drawing on the voices of 2,000 coaches and 67 organisational leaders, this report offers an unprecedented level of system visibility across UK sport. It combines a workforce lens, a cultural lens, a gender lens and a system-design lens to understand why inequity persists and what redesign requires.

### WHY THIS REPORT, WHY NOW?

The evidence points to a coaching workforce under strain. Coaches frequently report insecure contracts, poor working conditions, limited progression, and, in too many cases, unsafe or disrespectful environments. Trust in organisational processes is low, and confidence in reporting mechanisms is lower still. These pressures are experienced most acutely by women.

This is not a crisis of individual resilience. It is a crisis of system design and culture. The coaching system has long relied on passion, flexibility and self-sacrifice to compensate for weak structures. These expectations are neither sustainable nor equitable. As women's progression and retention suffer, the long-term health of the coaching workforce is undermined. These pressures are particularly acute in community settings, where coaches often operate with minimal pay or no pay at all, limited development support, and few formal protections, despite being central to participation and retention.

This sense of urgency is not because these issues are new, but because they are now converging. Precarity, mistrust and low psychological safety are increasingly widespread, threatening the sector's ability to deliver participation, wellbeing and performance outcomes. The sustainability of sport depends on the sustainability of coaching.



© Getty Images

## RETHINKING SUCCESS

Historically, sport in the UK has measured success primarily through medals and participation. While important, these metrics obscure the conditions required to sustain the workforce that delivers them. A system that prioritises outputs while neglecting workforce conditions is not designed for long-term resilience or equity.

The evidence shows that the quality, stability and safety of coaching work are foundational. This is true regardless of whether coaching is paid, part-paid or voluntary. Coaching is complex, skilled and relational work, yet the conditions experienced by many coaches do not reflect this reality. Informal roles, insecure contracts, unpaid labour and unclear progression remain common. Passion is one of coaching's strengths, but when relied upon to compensate for instability or lack of protection, it risks becoming exploitative.

We should rethink what success means for coaches; with a shift from focusing on what coaches produce to what coaches need to remain, progress and thrive. This reframing moves the conversation away from "fixing women" and toward system redesign.

## GENDER EQUALITY AS A SYSTEM INDICATOR

The findings in this report make clear that gender operates as one of the most powerful organising forces within the coaching system. Women face credibility gaps that men do not. They must routinely demonstrate expertise simply to be seen as competent, while their leadership is scrutinised against expectations that have long been shaped around men. This is not a reflection of individual behaviour; it is a structural expression of gender norms that are well documented across public life.

Positioning gender in this way strengthens the argument for system-level action. When women's experiences are examined closely, they reveal patterns that affect the entire coaching workforce: instability, informality, weak accountability, exclusion, and cultures that tolerate behaviours that undermine trust. Gender inequity therefore becomes a window into system inequity. It shows where the system is failing not just women, but coaches more widely. A coaching system that works for women will work better for everyone: more stable, more respectful, more transparent, and more sustainable.

## FUTURE-PROOFING COACHING: COACHING AS WORK, CONTRIBUTION AND CHOICE

Future-proofing coaching in this way requires recognising a fundamental shift in how people relate to work. Coaching will only remain viable if it is understood not only as work, but as work that people choose. This distinction matters. The coaching system has long relied on the assumption that passion will compensate for instability, emotional labour, unsocial hours, unclear expectations or inequitable environments. But passion is not an infinite resource, and the workforce of the future will not choose to remain in roles where the basic conditions of modern, responsible work are not met. This is as true for volunteer and community coaches as it is for those in paid or high-performance roles. When coaches, particularly women, decide not to stay, it is not a failure of personal resilience or motivation; it is a rational response to conditions that make the choice unsustainable.

As societal expectations shift, people increasingly make career choices based on stability, safety, progression, wellbeing, meaningful work and fairness. These expectations are not unique to coaching, but the consequences are sharper because the system has historically relied on discretionary labour and informality that no longer align with contemporary notions of good work. Future generations of coaches will not choose roles that require self-sacrifice as a baseline condition.

Future-proofing coaching therefore requires intentional redesign and culture change. It means ensuring that roles are clear, resourced and better supported. It requires cultures where psychological safety is normalised, not neglected. It demands progression pathways that are transparent and equitable, rather than reliant on networks. And it requires recognising that coaching is a valuable contribution to sport that deserves stability, respect and investment. A coaching system that works for women will be more stable for everyone. A coaching system that treats coaching as work will be more resilient. And a coaching system that acknowledges that people have choices will be better positioned to retain and develop the workforce required for the future of sport.

# Methodology & Respondent Demographics

## METHODOLOGY

This research set out to understand how coaching in sport is experienced and shaped, from the realities of being a coach on the ground to the operational and strategic influence at the organisational level, and where change is most needed.

We used quantitative research methods in the form of three separate, yet connected, national surveys to Coaches, Heads of Coaching Workforce and CEOs. This enabled us to gather insights from across the coaching workforce at all stages of the coaching pathway, as well as from the leaders and organisations that deliver and shape the coaching system.



## DATA ANALYSIS

Survey data was cleaned and quality-checked, while retaining partial responses wherever possible to ensure voices were not unnecessarily excluded. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and visualised through interactive dashboards to explore trends, themes and relationships in the data. Open-text responses were analysed thematically and are included throughout the report as quotations to illustrate the findings.

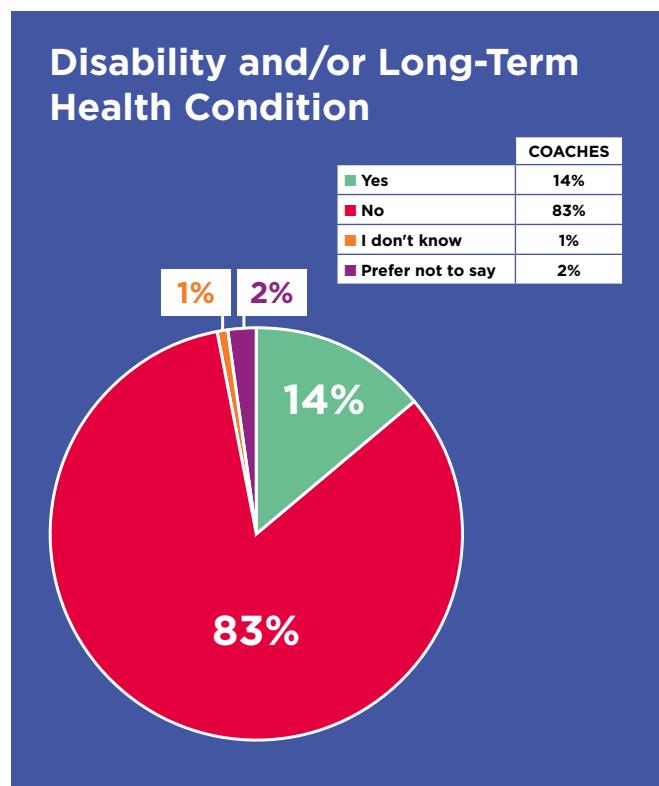
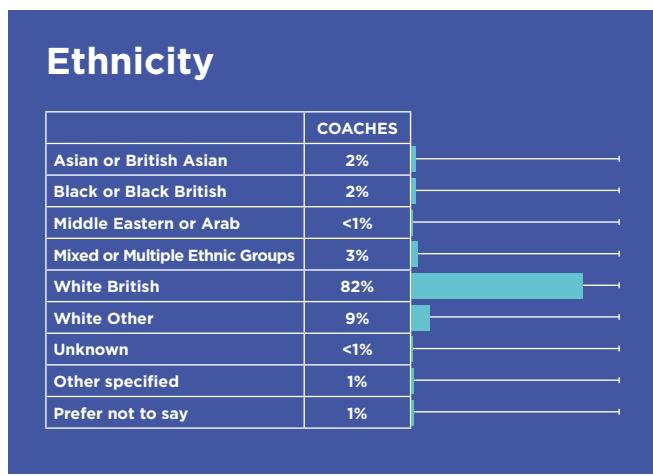
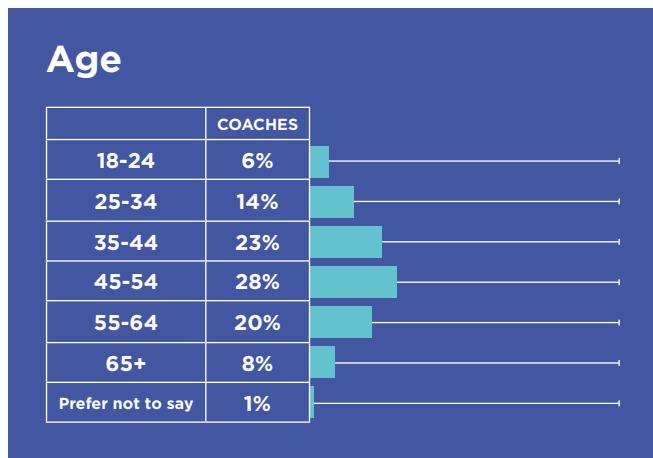
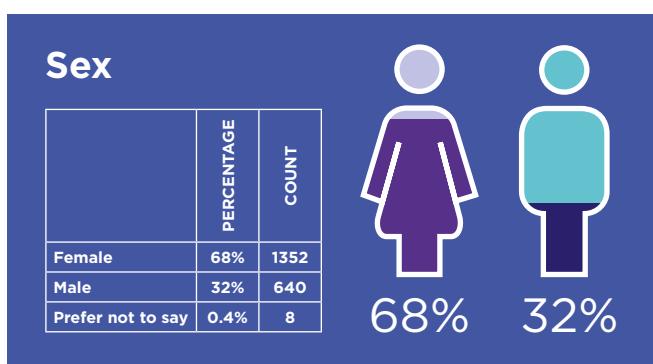
This research was conducted between July – November 2025.

## RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

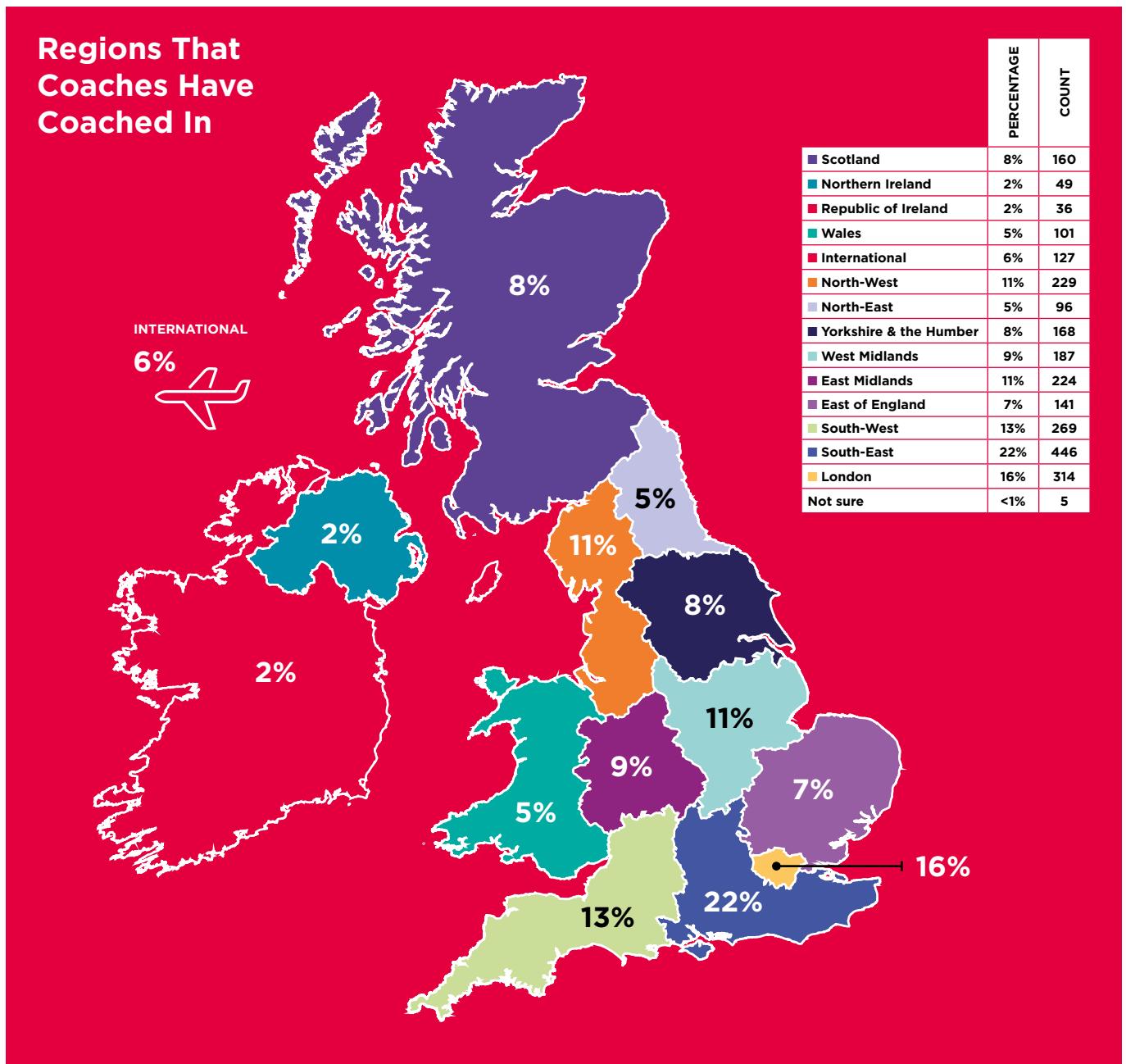
Three separate surveys were used to gather insights from coaches, CEOs, and Heads of Coaching Workforces to gain an understanding of the structural, cultural, and systemic enablers and barriers that shape the coaching environment. We adopted a gendered lens to understand the different experiences for men and women working in that environment. This section outlines key demographics for the three respondent groups, whilst also protecting anonymity where necessary for smaller sample groups. Please note that this is not a census study; therefore, the demographics do not represent the UK coaching population.

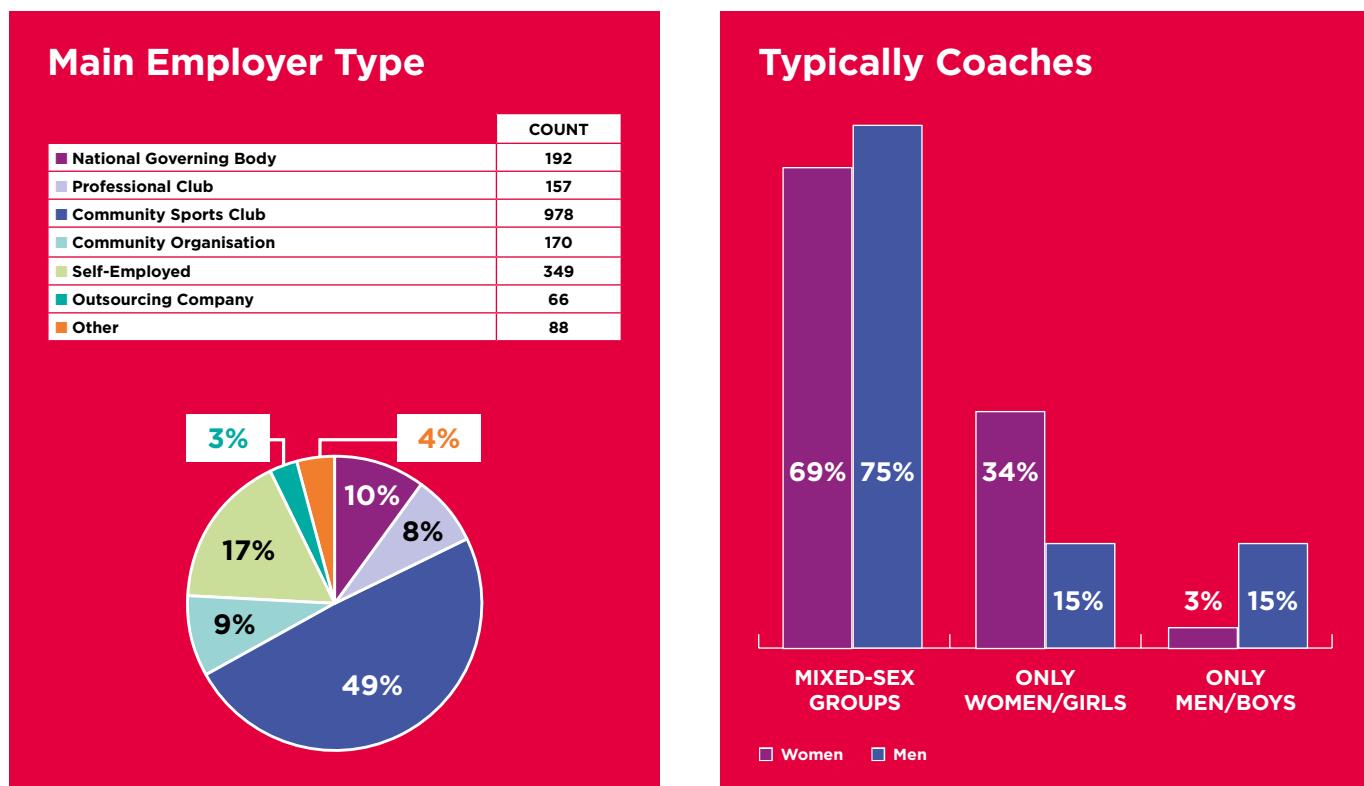
### COACH SURVEY

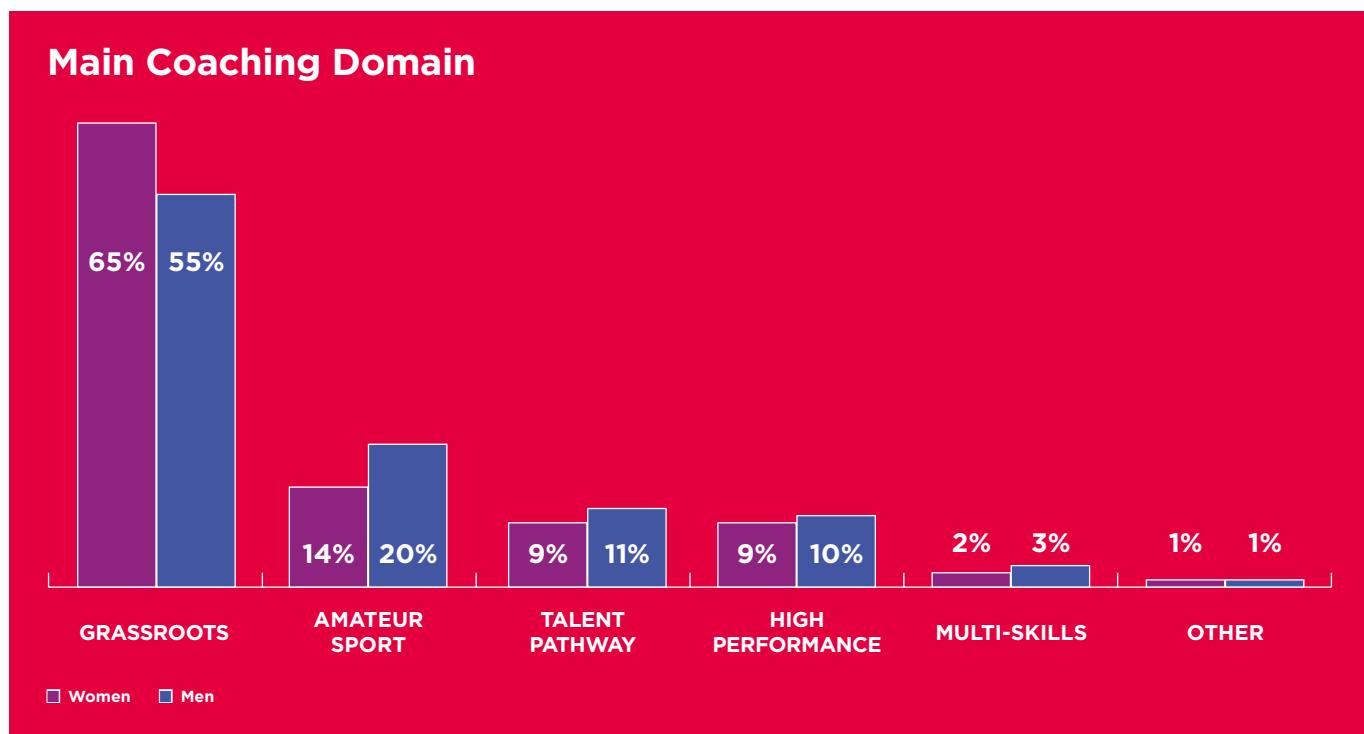
(2,000 RESPONDENTS)



## COACHING PROFILES

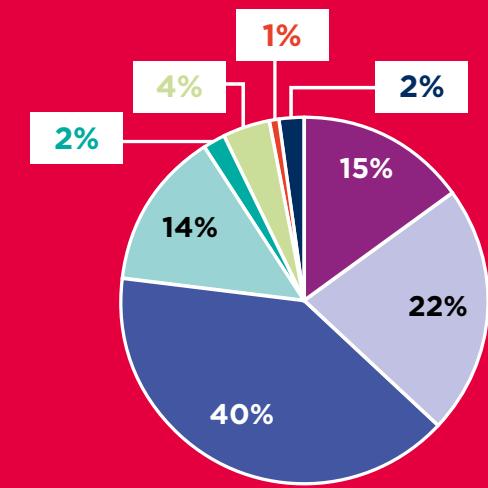






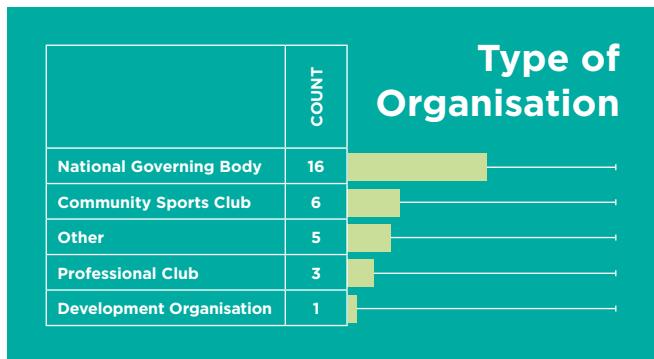
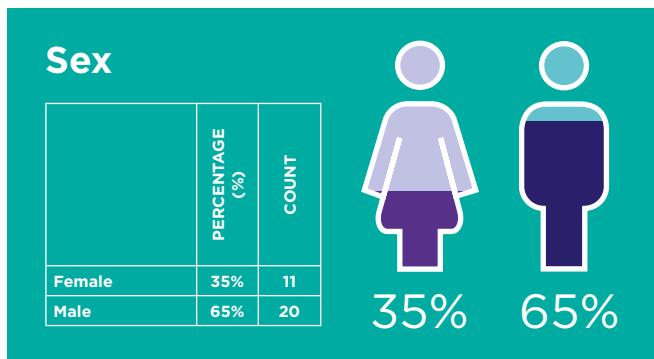
### Coaching Qualification

Level 4+ (or equivalent)	15% (n=308)
Level 3 (or equivalent)	22% (n=429)
Level 2 (or equivalent)	40% (n=798)
Level 1 (or equivalent)	14% (n=283)
Working towards a qualification	2% (n=49)
No qualifications	4% (n=83)
Prefer not to say	1% (n=16)
Other	2% (n=34)

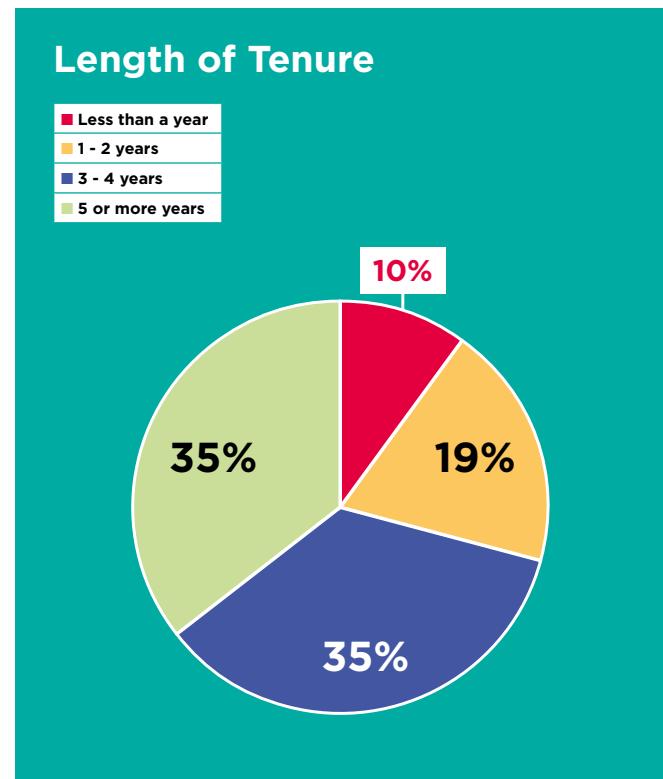


## CEO/HEADS OF ORGANISATION SURVEY

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS = 31

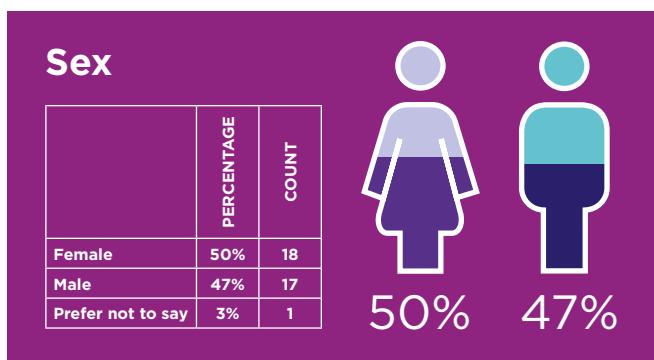


NUMBER OF SPORTS REPRESENTED = 20 SPORTS

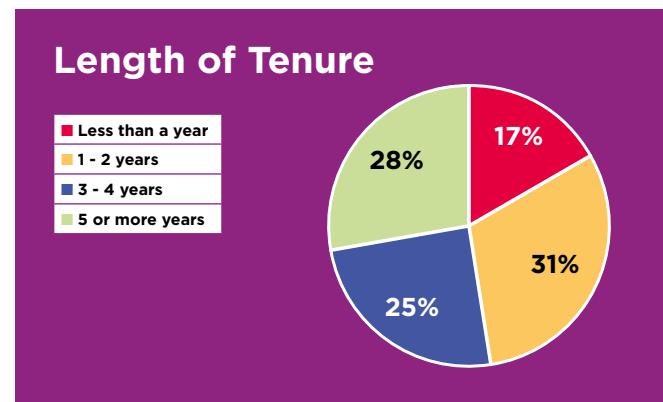
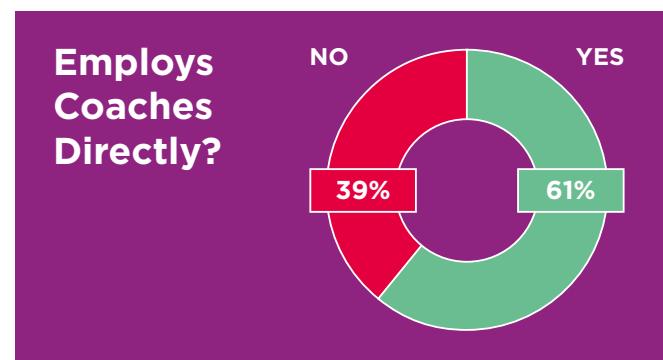


## HEADS OF COACHING WORKFORCE SURVEY

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS = 36



NUMBER OF SPORTS REPRESENTED = 20 SPORTS



# The Coaching System Conditions Model

This report is underpinned by a Coaching System Conditions Model to help make sense of how coaching operates across the system. The model focuses on the conditions that shape coaching, rather than placing responsibility on individual coaches. It brings together four connected areas that structured the design of the insight and the surveys used in this research: the Employment Landscape, Coach Development and Progression, Culture and Inclusion, and Keeping Coaches Safe from Harm. Together, these areas capture the core conditions that influence whether coaches can enter the system, remain within it, progress if they wish to do so, and experience coaching as safe, valued and sustainable.

Importantly, these conditions are interrelated. Weaknesses in one area often reinforce pressures in others. For example, insecure employment can limit access to development, poor cultures can undermine safety and belonging, and a lack of trust in reporting systems can affect retention and progression. The model therefore reflects how coaching is experienced in practice, as a set of connected conditions rather than isolated issues.

While the model applies to all coaches, it is used in this report to examine how these system conditions

are experienced similarly or differently by women and men. Women's experiences are treated as an important indicator of how well the system is functioning, as patterns of disadvantage or harm affecting women often reveal wider weaknesses in structures, cultures and practices. Using this model allows the report to identify where pressures sit across the coaching system and to show how improving conditions for women will strengthen the system for everyone. The Coaching System Conditions Model therefore provides the organising framework for the findings and the actions that follow.

## COACHING SYSTEM CONDITIONS MODEL



# Findings:

## The Realities of Coaching



 1 | Employment Landscape

**Reality 1.1** – Coaching is characterised by an unstable and volatile employment landscape.

**Reality 1.2** – For many, working in coaching as a primary occupation is unsustainable.

**Reality 1.3** – Women coaches are disadvantaged in accessing permanent and stable employment.

**Reality 1.4** – Overall, women coaches can depend less on coaching income.

**Reality 1.5** – Coaches have low awareness of maternity and paternity policies and pay entitlements.

 2 | Coach Development and Progression

**Reality 2.1** – Coach career pathways are ill-defined across the sector.

**Reality 2.2** – Access to personal and professional development is inadequate.

**Reality 2.3** – Sex discrimination inhibits progression for women.

**Reality 2.4** – Continuous professional development (CPD) is underfunded, with women impacted most.

 3 | Culture and Inclusion

**Reality 3.1** – Coaches' sense of belonging is shaped by their personal characteristics and working environment.

**Reality 3.2** – Bias fuels negative assumptions about the competence and abilities of female coaches.

**Reality 3.3** – Women coaches feel less heard and valued in their coaching environment.

**Reality 3.4** – Women are less likely than men to feel comfortable being their authentic selves while coaching.

**Reality 3.5** – Negative cultural experiences impact the retention of women coaches.

**Reality 3.6** – The Boards and Senior Leadership Teams surveyed are predominantly male.

 4 | Keeping Coaches Safe from Harm

**Reality 4.1** – Harm is widespread in coaching, but significantly worse for women.

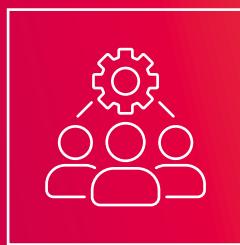
**Reality 4.2** – Sex is the most cited perceived reason across all forms of harm for women.

**Reality 4.3** – Unspoken cultural rules often silence victims, and women are most impacted.

**Reality 4.4** – Safeguarding systems are not serving coaches well, least of all women.

**Reality 4.5** – There is a lack of trust in safeguarding systems.

**Reality 4.6** – There are inadequate policies to tackle misogyny and protect women in coaching.



# 1

# Employment Landscape

## REALITY 1.1

Coaching is characterised by an unstable and volatile employment landscape.

- There are relatively few paid jobs in coaching, and a high proportion of unpaid volunteering roles.
- The low rate of permanent jobs and high rate of casual contracts results in variable legal protection for coaches employed in the sector.

## REALITY 1.3

Women coaches are disadvantaged in accessing permanent and stable employment.

- Men are more likely to occupy permanent, full-time coaching roles than women.
- For women, minority ethnicity, age, or disability, can add a further layer of disadvantage when it comes to accessing economic stability and opportunities.

## REALITY 1.2

For many, working in coaching as a primary occupation is unsustainable.

- Coaching is often not the primary occupation due to low rates of pay and job insecurity, resulting in many coaches needing dual employment for financial stability.

## REALITY 1.4

Overall, women coaches can depend less on coaching income.

- Men earn a higher salary than women.
- Women are also less likely to be paid expenses.



## REALITY 1.5

Coaches have low awareness of maternity and paternity policies and pay entitlements.

- The majority of coaches lack awareness of maternity and/or paternity policies and pay entitlement within their club/organisation.

## Introduction

In this section, we explore the current employment landscape for the coach survey respondents: contracting approaches, remuneration, the rights and protections that shape working conditions across the sector, and how these practices influence job and financial security. Particular attention is given to women's experiences in the workforce to highlight gender disparities. By comparing women's and men's experiences, this section also seeks to identify the structural and cultural factors that continue to disadvantage women and to examine how these shape women coaches' participation.

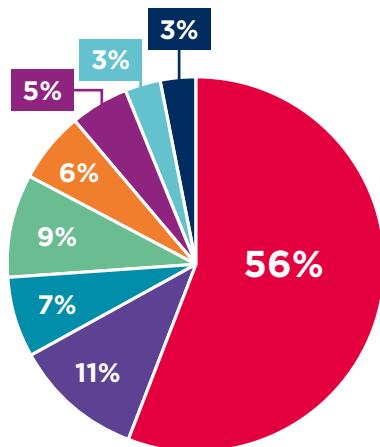
### REALITY 1.1

#### Coaching is characterised by an unstable and volatile employment landscape.

The coaching employment landscape is defined by a complex mix of permanent, fixed-term, and casual contracts, which contribute to dynamic, often volatile employment conditions in which job security and reliable remuneration can be limited. This fluid and challenging environment has significant implications for coach retention, wellbeing, and organisational performance. Even progression into more senior coaching roles, often accompanied by increased responsibility, does not guarantee long-term security.

**Figure 1.1 - Contractual status of active coaches**

■ Unpaid Volunteers	56%
■ Permanent Full-Time	11%
■ Permanent Part-Time	7%
■ Zero-Hours	9%
■ Fixed-Term Contract	6%
■ Part-Time Contract	5%
■ I don't know	3%
■ Other specified	3%



Only one in nine coaches has a permanent contract.

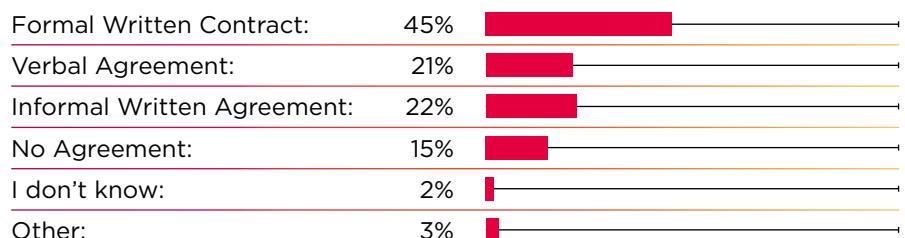
Less than a quarter of coaches are clearly defined as having 'employee' status, which would provide them full legal protection, including redundancy rights under the Employment Rights Act 1996.

One in five coaches with non-permanent contracts are not clear about their legal rights, with many believing they have no legal protection whatsoever, which is not always the case.

There is a heavy reliance on unpaid volunteers in the sector (56%).

Over half of the coaches in paid employment (permanent and contract) report not having received a formal agreement outlining the terms and conditions of their employment. The absence of formality is likely to heighten uncertainty around financial security, with employment rights unclear.

#### Contract type for coaches in paid employment.



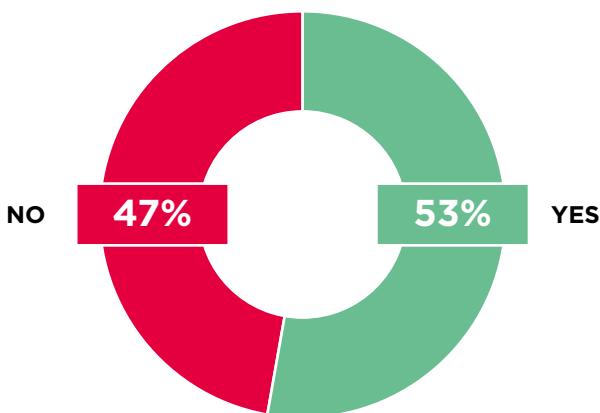
\*Some coaches hold multiple roles and chose more than one option.

## REALITY 1.2

### For many, a coaching career is unsustainable.

Many coaches report that they cannot rely on coaching income alone, as the salaries and contract conditions are too unstable to sustain a living. Consequently, they often hold additional roles, sometimes full-time jobs in entirely different sectors or multiple part-time coaching contracts, to secure financial stability. This reliance on other employment reflects a broader concern; many coaches are hesitant to pursue coaching as a full-time career because they perceive it as volatile, insecure, and lacking long-term prospects. In such an unpredictable employment landscape, attracting and retaining coaches becomes increasingly difficult, raising important questions about how the sector can support individuals to view coaching as a viable and sustainable career.

Figure 1.2 - Coaching as primary occupation



**\*Of those who said no:**

- 58% have an additional full-time job
- 15% have an additional part-time job
- 14% are self-employed or free-lance
- 7% in full-time education
- 7% are retired
- 3% 'other'
- 2% looking for work

\*Some coaches hold multiple roles and chose more than one option



**It is not a safe option for work if it is your sole income... I and so many others struggle.”**

Man, Talent Pathway Coach

**Coaching is a chronically underpaid position. To be on such minimal pay means that it can only attract people who are not serious about a career or any long-term prospects. It's almost impossible to have a mortgage or support children through coaching alone, even in a full-time position with a professional club.”**

Man, Grassroots Coach

**Lack of job security is the biggest issue... part-time nature of roles make it difficult to survive within the profession.”**

Woman, Talent Pathway coach

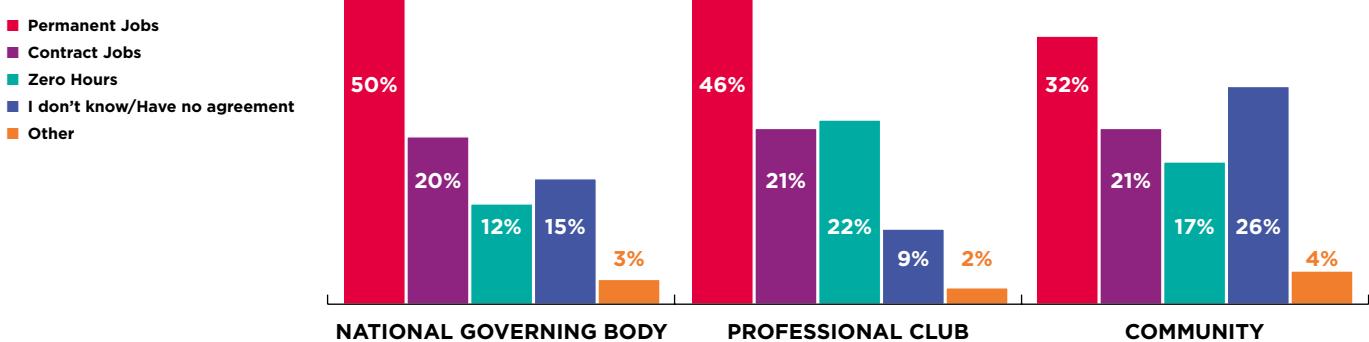
**If you're unwell there's no 'sick pay' for you.”**

Woman, Talent Pathway Coach

The distribution of coaching roles across major employers demonstrates the challenges of entering and establishing a coaching career. Only 17% of community-level positions in our survey (the entry point for most new accredited coaches) are permanent full-time and 14% are permanent part-time roles (Figure 1.3). Given this limited availability of secure employment, it is unsurprising that there is a significant drop-off in coach participation after Level 2 qualifications. While many coaches have no desire to pursue coaching as a full-time career and instead, continue to enjoy part-time or voluntary roles for many years, the scarcity of paid permanent positions places an additional burden on those who do want to progress. They must navigate an already challenging pathway without the stability and security that would typically support their long-term development.



**Figure 1.3 -**  
**Contract of employment**  
**by employer type**



### KEY REALITY 1.3

## Women coaches are disadvantaged in accessing permanent and stable employment.

Patterns in contract types for men and women make evident that structural inequalities still underpin employment opportunities across coaching. In common with the UK workforce as a whole<sup>1</sup>, in coaching, substantially more men than women have permanent, full-time roles (Figure 1.4) highlighting a persistent and systemic pattern of gender inequality. Significantly more women than men are on zero-hours contracts or have no agreement in place.

In a sector already characterised by a scarcity of paid employment and permanent roles, this uneven distribution further disadvantages women, limiting their access to job security, financial stability, and career progression. Of the 10% of paid coaches in our survey who experienced their contracts being terminated, men most commonly cite lack of funding as the reason, while women cited organisational restructuring or changes in management.

Figure 1.4 – Employment contract type: the gender gap

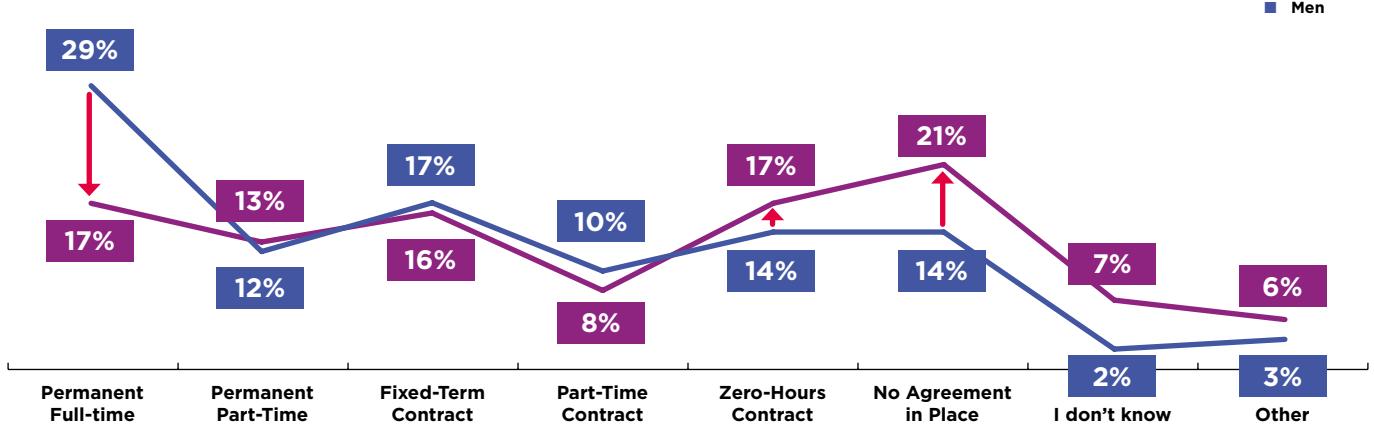


Figure 1.5 - Permanent contracts by age

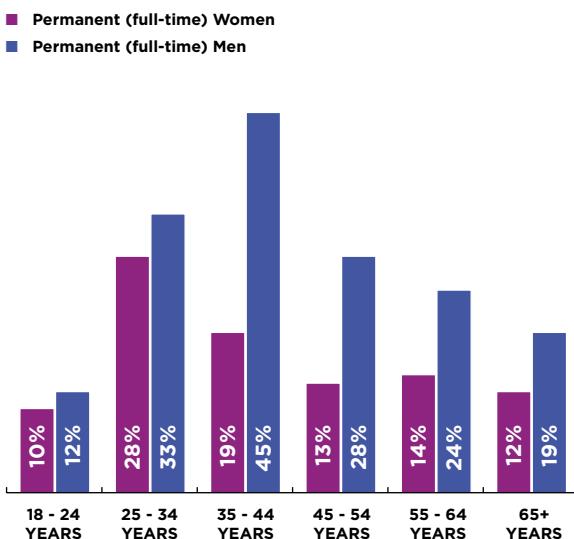


Figure 1.5 highlights a further issue: men hold more full-time permanent roles than women across all age groups. The gap starts small, widening in the 25-34 age bracket, typically a key progression period in the coaching pathway as individuals transition into more senior roles. Male coaches aged 35-54 are more than twice as likely to have permanent full-time roles than female coaches. This is the period when coaches are in the prime of their careers having accumulated considerable experience and expertise and therefore may be targeting high-performance or elite-level positions. This substantial imbalance continues beyond this into the older age groups.

**71% OF CEOS AGREE:**

THE SECTOR IS LOSING TALENTED WOMEN BECAUSE THERE ARE SO FEW PAID POSTS OPEN TO THEM.

**“I would love to coach full-time, but there are very few jobs. Coaching part-time is fun, but doesn’t pay the bills, so I have a non-coaching full-time job.”**

Woman, Amateur Coach

The intersection of sex and ethnicity creates compounded disadvantage for women from ethnically diverse groups in coaching, where only 10% hold a permanent role, compared with 29% of women who identified as White.

A clear disparity also emerges when the experiences of men and women coaches with disabilities or long-term health conditions are compared with those of non-disabled coaches in paid roles. Only 15% of the coaches with a disability surveyed report holding permanent positions, compared with 25% of their non-disabled counterparts. This gap highlights that coaches with a disability also face a notable disadvantage and underrepresentation within the coaching system.

## REALITY 1.4

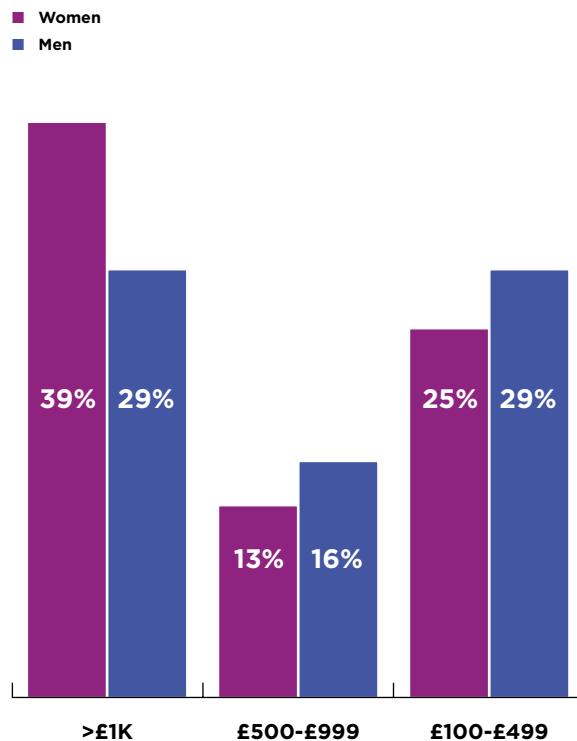
### Overall, women can depend less on coaching income.

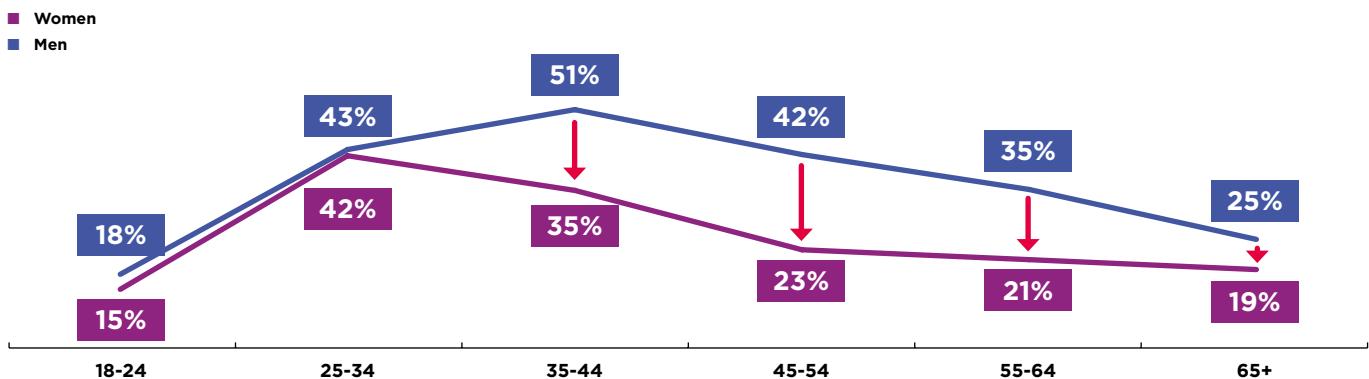
Figure 1.6 illustrates that there is a clear gap in take-home pay from our sample of coaches, with 10% fewer women than men earning an income of more than £1,000 per month (approximately one in three male coaches versus one in four female coaches). This reflects the higher number of women who are working part-time. The lower proportion of women in permanent roles and the disparity in pay helps explain why representation remains a persistent issue and why fewer women progress within the system.



In the early stages of their coaching careers, women and men appear to be aligned in terms of pay, suggesting that entry into the profession offers a similar financial starting point for both sexes (Figure 1.7). However, this balance begins to shift as coaches progress through their careers.

**Figure 1.6 - Comparison of top three pay bands**



**Figure 1.7 - Coaches earning >£1000 per month by age**

The most significant disparity in earnings was found among those aged 35-44. This is a critical phase in a coach's professional development as many move through advanced pathways, take on increased responsibilities, and pursue leadership or high-performance roles. During this key period, women are notably less likely than men to be earning at higher levels. Although the gap slowly begins to narrow in later years it continues well into older age groups, only showing significant reduction once coaches reach sixty-five and above. This persistent disparity suggests a structural issue that follows women throughout much of their coaching careers.

Of the Heads of Coaching Workforce surveyed, 59% stated that coaches are always paid the same, and a further 18% stated that they are sometimes paid the same, suggesting a gap in understanding in how women are impacted in terms of pay and access to permanency. Further investigation into pay for women and men in coaching is needed.



**GG**

**The man coaching the seniors, in the same role is paid - my role is unpaid.”**

Woman, Talent Pathway Coach

---

**The role is under appreciated and in general low paid for the expectation, expertise, and dedication/qualifications required.”**

Woman, High-Performance Coach

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**Very difficult to generate enough money to live off.”**

Man, Amateur Coach

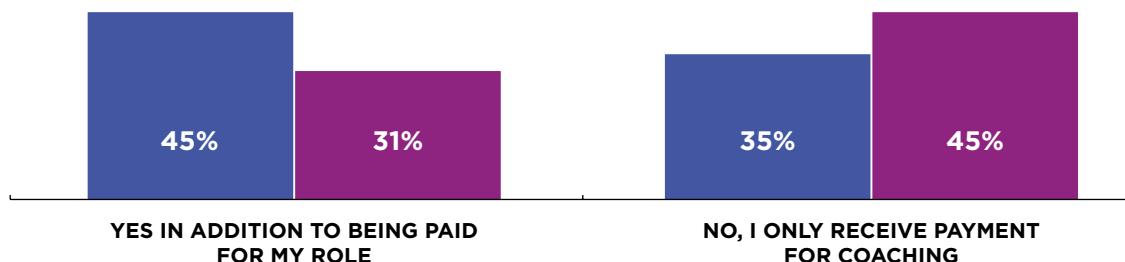
## EXPENSE CLAIMS

While 55% of Heads of Coaching Workforce state that coaches never have to pay expenses out of their own pocket and 36% reported that this happens sometimes, the findings from our coach survey suggest quite a different picture. While many organisations provide reimbursement for coaching-related expenses, a substantial proportion of coaches (including volunteers) are still required to absorb these costs personally. Given that rates of pay within the sector are already relatively low, this often results in individuals being out of pocket, particularly when travel, equipment, accreditation, and subsistence costs are considered.

In addition to being underrepresented in higher earning brackets, women are also less likely than men to have their expenses reimbursed (Figure 1.8). 14% fewer women than men receive expenses in addition to their coaching income, and women are 10% more likely than men to report receiving no expense payments in addition to their coaching salary. This compounds the existing gendered disadvantage within the sector, creating a dual financial penalty for women: reduced access to higher-paid opportunities and reduced likelihood of recovering work-related costs. These findings point towards a systemic structural issue that perpetuates financial inequity and may contribute to the ongoing underrepresentation and attrition of women within the coaching workforce.

**Figure 1.8 - Expenses reimbursed - paid coaches**

■ Women  
■ Men



GG

**A lot of voluntary work has involved long competition days and not being reimbursed for petrol costs.”**

Woman, Grassroots Coach

**We aren't given stable contracts of employment and don't get expenses to cover any travel to and from sites, we don't get paid to set up sessions. All of this has to happen in our own time at our own expense which is more of an issue with the cost-of-living crisis. I have to rely on my partner to support our family financially which is less than ideal - you don't go into coaching for the pay.”**

Woman, Grassroots Coach

**Figure 1.9 – Late payment**

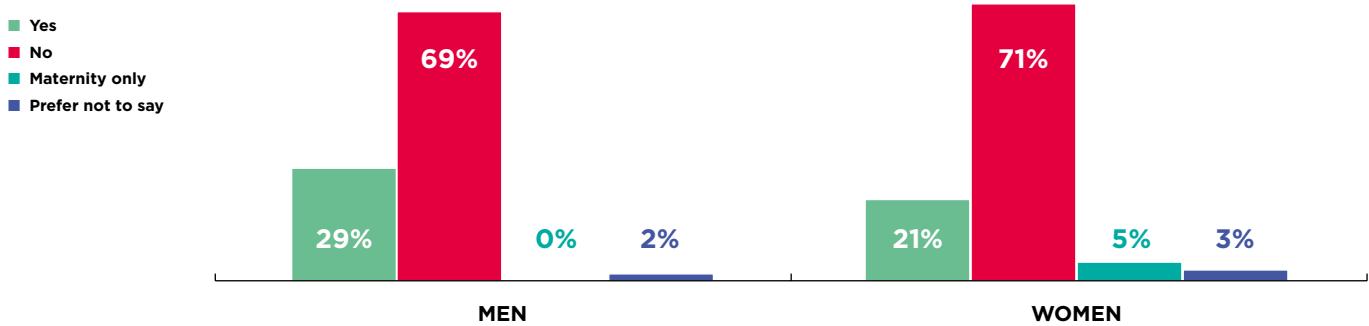
handful-of-times frequently  
almost-monthly lost-count  
regularly everytime **twice** often  
most-of-the-time  
every-payment every-month  
always-having-to-chase

**LATE PAYMENT**

Late payment of salary and expenses is a significant issue for 1 in 5 coaches. 85% of Heads of Workforce believe payments are made in a timely manner, while 5% acknowledged that payments are never made on time and a further 9% stated delays occur sometimes. Coaches' frustrations around delayed payments underscore the persistence of this issue (Figure 1.9). This may stem from weak administrative processes and requires further investigation and targeted action to ensure payment systems are dependable and supportive of staff well-being.

**REALITY 1.5****Coaches have low awareness of maternity and paternity policies and pay entitlement.**

It is notable that many coaches (both men and women), regardless of age, remain unaware of what statutory and/or contractual rights they actually have (Figure 1.10). For many women coaches, this issue is compounded by the fact that they are employed on more casual contracts and therefore may not be entitled to maternity benefits at all. Given the typical distribution of jobs in this sector, where so many coaches are on casual or zero-hour contracts, not all women will have protected maternity rights, and even among those who do, awareness is often limited. This creates significant challenges for women coaches, particularly those in non-permanent roles, who wish to pursue both a coaching career and motherhood.

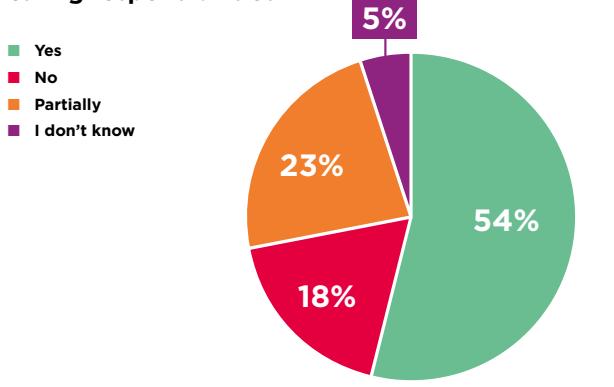
**Figure 1.10 - Coaches' awareness of maternity/paternity policies**

While many organisations are updating their maternity, paternity, and parental leave policies to strengthen support for women and men to improve retention, the lived reality for many women coaches in both permanent and contract roles is that they feel uncomfortable or even afraid to ask about their rights when planning a pregnancy. This stems from a pervasive perception within sport that pregnancy and motherhood conflict with the demands of coaching.

This view is often intensified in high-performance environments where motherhood is frequently seen as incompatible with elite coaching roles. The demands of high-performance sport, such as extended periods away at training camps or competitions, further disadvantage talented women coaches who are also mothers. They must either make substantial personal sacrifices to be away from their children or potentially prejudice their career by missing these opportunities.

It is encouraging that many Heads of Coaching Workforce report (Figure 1.11) that their organisations provide support for coaches with childcare or caring responsibilities, particularly when work requires time away from home, such as sessions, conferences, continuous professional development, training camps, or competitions. However, 18% of organisations do not provide any support, which may be due to a lack of funding or understanding of parent coaches' needs, and/or a reluctance to change.

**Figure 1.11 - Organisations that provide support for coaches with childcare and/or caring responsibilities**



#### MATERNITY/PATERNITY PAYMENTS FOR COACHES

Awareness of maternity and paternity pay entitlements among coaches was low. Overall, 43% of women and 37% of men do not know whether they would be paid during leave, while 16% of women and 22% of men believe they had no entitlements at all. Awareness is particularly poor in professional clubs, where around 70% of both women and men were unsure if they would receive pay. This points to a clear information gap and highlights the financial insecurity faced by coaches considering taking leave. The sector needs to consider the role that access to maternity rights plays in supporting the retention of women coaches.

#### CONCLUSION

The coaching employment landscape is characterised by job insecurity, limited permanent roles, fragmented contracts, and inconsistent access to legal rights and protections. Remuneration is generally low, undermining the viability of coaching as a stable or primary employment option. The widespread use of casual contracts introduces a level of informality that sits uneasily with the expectations of a professional and rewarding work environment, particularly given the level of responsibility and expertise the roles demand.

Although these systemic challenges affect all coaches, women, in comparison to their male counterparts, report lower pay, more limited access to permanent or secure positions, and fewer development opportunities. These disadvantages not only restrict the careers of individual women but also limit the growth, diversity, and effectiveness of the coaching workforce as a whole.

Addressing employment instability and gender inequalities is essential to strengthening the coaching workforce, increasing the representation of women and ensuring the sector can thrive.



**Pregnant with first child... employer suggested I take time to see if I wanted to be a mother or a coach."**

Woman, High-Performance Coach

**When I had my first child I was told by my club as a first-time mum I wouldn't be able to work full-time and would need time away to see if I could do the job and raise kids. There was no maternity leave."**

Woman, High-Performance Coach

**The difficulty with women getting to elite coaching is that if they want to have children, taking 6-12 months maternity will impact their client retention and their clients will find new coaches by the time they are ready to coach again."**

Head of Coaching Workforce



# 2

# Coach Development and Progression

## REALITY 2.1

Coach career pathways are ill-defined across the sector.

- Licensing and accreditation are the key focus, with wider coach development lacking.
- Clear career structures are rare, leaving coaches uncertain about career choices and options to progress.

## REALITY 2.4

Continuous professional development (CPD) is underfunded, with women impacted most.

- Coach development is fragmented and uneven, both in access to CPD, and in how it is funded.
- Women report having less access to CPD funding from their employer than men report.

## REALITY 2.2

Access to personal and professional development is inadequate.

- Low priority is given to coaches' development, with few receiving regular feedback or having personal development plans.
- Women are disproportionately disadvantaged in progressing their careers.

## REALITY 2.3

Sex discrimination inhibits progression for women.

- One in three women report that they experienced discrimination in development and progression, with their sex being the perceived primary reason.



## Introduction

Coaches play a critical role in delivering organisational outcomes: at grassroots, they shape participant engagement and retention, serving as the public face of the organisation or club and within the talent pathway and elite levels, they are critical to the success of athletes and teams.

Over the years, particularly as coaching has become more professionalised, a career in coaching has become a viable option for more people. In this section, we explore the factors that shape coaches' development in relation to career planning and progression, access to continuing professional development (CPD), and performance management. While these elements are often associated with formal career advancement, they also play an important role among volunteers and coaches who are primarily focused on developing their skills, enjoying their role, and performing to the best of their ability. We consider how men and women experience development to understand how current structures and practices influence both opportunities for development and shape representation in the sector. This section covers both paid and volunteer coaches, with data drawn from both.

### REALITY 2.1

#### Coach career pathways are ill-defined.

Licensing and accreditation systems form the main framework for formal qualifications and are the most familiar and widely recognised route for progression. Many coaches start as volunteers, developing practical skills and experience, before pursuing formal qualifications. Coach licences and qualifications determine the level at which they are permitted to work, whether at grassroots, in the talent pathway, or at the high-performance level. In order to meet regulatory and insurance requirements organisations

must ensure coaches hold the correct licences and qualifications. For an individual, this means that perceptions of progress can become solely focused on moving up through the "levels", as this dictates how much you may be paid and where you can coach. For the organisation, this may result in less focus on developing structured career pathways, supporting broader professional development, addressing gender inequalities in career progression, or investing in continuing professional development (CPD).



Only 32% of Heads of Coaching Workforces state that their organisation has structured career pathways for coaches. Yet structure is needed to help coaches grow and make informed choices about whether to stay at their current level, move sideways or upwards, specialise, or progress into talent and high-performance pathways. Lack of clarity can hold individuals back from gaining the experience and development needed to apply for roles that may require the same licence, but may require different skills, knowledge and expertise. For the individual coach, navigating the range of options can feel impossible.

For the organisation, the absence of structured career pathways makes it difficult to design or deliver effective coach development. Without a coherent framework that links learning and experience to opportunities, coach development is not designed to develop and retain coaches or genuinely support those who wish to progress in the long term. This position is acknowledged by CEOs:

**77% OF CEOS AGREE THAT COACHING AS A CAREER PATHWAY IS ILL-DEFINED AND REQUIRES MODERNISATION**

A lack of fundamental structure and clarity in coach development complicates career planning, leaving coaches to operate within an ambiguous and often frustrating system. Where there is a lack of structure in career pathways, those most familiar with the system and who know more people in the system (predominantly men) will tend to do better than those who don't. As awareness of this issue grows, many sports and sport-sector bodies are beginning to take action. In doing so, they should consider how structures can more effectively reflect the needs of women.



**The NGB I volunteer for probably doesn't know I exist! They are only interested in me renewing my licence. That sounds pretty cynical but it's true."**

Woman, Grassroots Coach

**Coaching in [sport] is still in the dark ages and primarily there is no room for growth".**

Man, High-Performance Coach

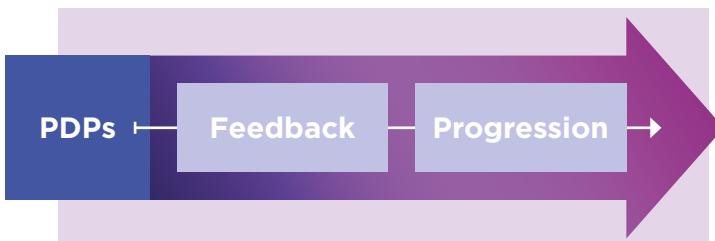


## REALITY 2.2

### Access to personal and professional development is inadequate.

Despite coaches' central role in supporting athletes and participants to achieve their outcomes, coaches often receive far less attention when it comes to their own performance management and ongoing professional development. Here, we look at three key critical elements of a performance management approach: Personal Development Plans (PDPs), Performance Feedback, and Progression.

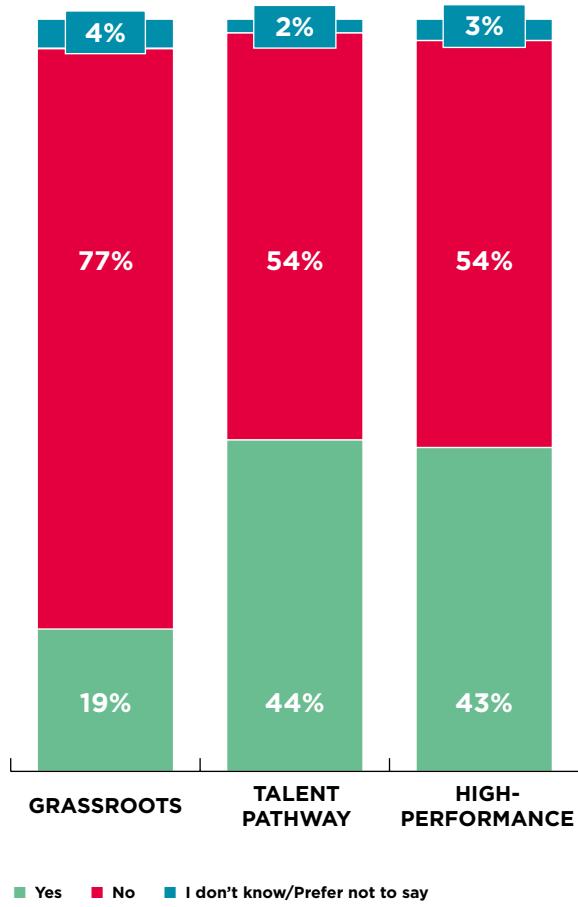
#### PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS (PDPs)



Most coaches, whether they wish to progress through formal pathways or simply develop their own practice, would welcome the opportunity to enhance their skills and learn. As such, a Personal Development Plan (PDP) is important for all coaches, helping them to identify goals, assess current skills, and plan targeted development. By aligning learning activities with long-term aspirations or personal coaching interests, PDPs help coaches to understand where they are heading and how to get there. This gives all coaches a clear path for ongoing development and supports career advancement for those who wish to progress.



**Figure 2.1 - Coaches who have PDPs across coaching domains**

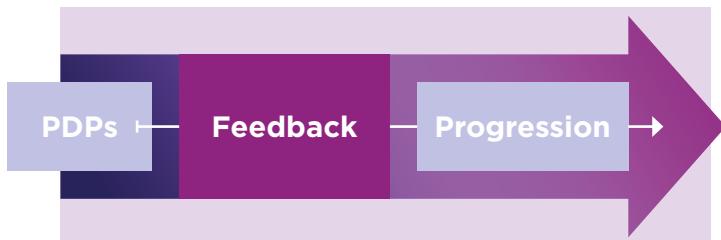


- 1 in 2 coaches in the talent pathway and high-performance domains have no PDP.
- Only 1 in 5 coaches have a PDP at the grassroots level.

Figure 2.1. suggests that PDPs are the exception rather than the norm across all coaching domains; overall circa 70% of all coaches who responded do not have a PDP. While some unpaid volunteers benefit (15% had a PDP), even among permanent staff only one in three reported having a PDP. CEOs surveyed recognise the value of PDPs and 63% state that PDPs are mandatory for their talent pathway and high-performance coaches.

Providing more structured support for coaches to navigate their own growth through a challenging landscape, will make it easier to attract and retain talented coaches particularly women, given the other inequalities they face.

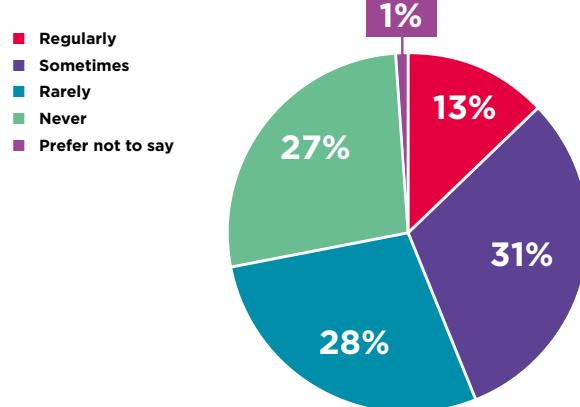
## FEEDBACK



Beyond PDPs, regular and frequent feedback is essential for coaches to know how they are progressing and is a critical component of coach development. It helps individuals understand their strengths, make incremental improvements, feel supported, build confidence in their practice, and identify areas for improvement. As displayed in Figure 2.2, very few coaches receive regular feedback. Indeed, 55% state they rarely or never receive feedback.

**ONLY 13% OF COACHES RECEIVE REGULAR FEEDBACK**

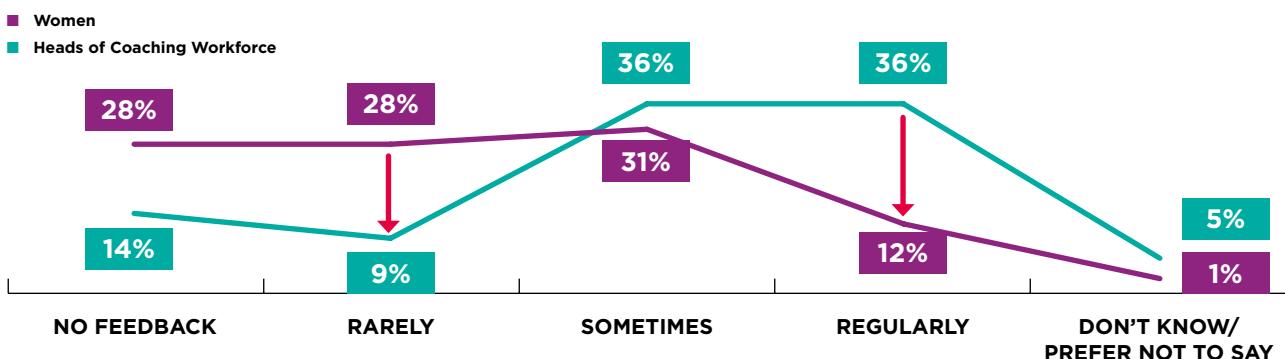
**Figure 2.2 – Frequency of feedback reported by all coaches**



Frequency is an important aspect of effective feedback. Infrequent or no feedback can give the impression that development is not a priority and that coaches are not valued.

Although men and women coaches report similar levels of feedback, we explored women's experiences further with Heads of Coaching Workforces. Figure 2.3 presents a comparison of women coaches' experiences of feedback and organisational perceptions of its provision, highlighting a notable difference in views. While 36% of workforce leaders report that feedback is provided regularly, only 12% of women coaches concur, being much more likely to report that feedback is rare (28%) or that there is none (28%). By prioritising coach feedback and development, coach employers can strengthen coaching capability, improve retention, and enhance participant outcomes.

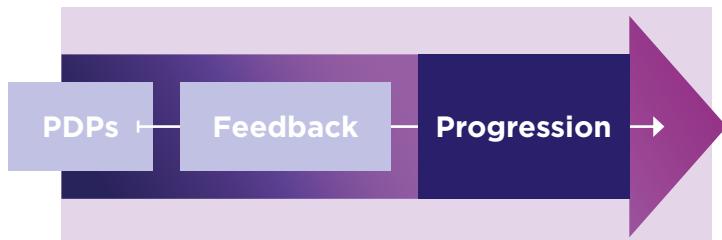
**Figure 2.3 - Frequency of feedback: Female Coaches Experience vs Heads of Coaching Workforce Perspective**



**Development is mainly focused on players. Coach development and progression, PDPs or coach development plans are either overlooked or squeezed into a very short time slot... I haven't had a meeting in a couple of seasons!"**

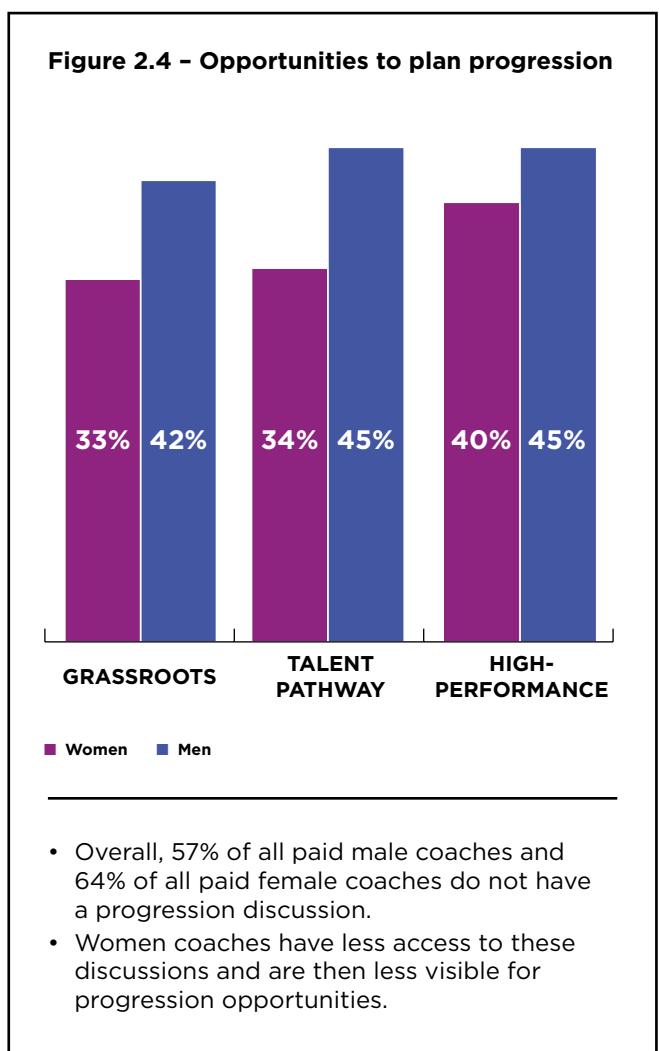
Woman, Talent Pathway Coach

## PROGRESSION



Progression conversations play a vital role in providing opportunities for coaches to reflect on their goals, receive guidance, and focus on their next steps, as well as opening up choices that they may not have been aware of.

Many coaches report having little to no opportunity to engage in these conversations. Even for those who choose coaching as a full-time career, access to progression-related conversations appears inconsistent and highly variable. Across domains, the provision of progression conversations also reveals a marked gender disparity, with women being afforded fewer opportunities to plan and discuss their career progression than men (Figure 2.4).



Women experience unequal access to progression planning, with men consistently receiving more opportunities to build their CVs. This disparity places women at a significant disadvantage when seeking to progress. Only a third of CEOs recognise this problem, with 36% agreeing that women have less access to development opportunities.

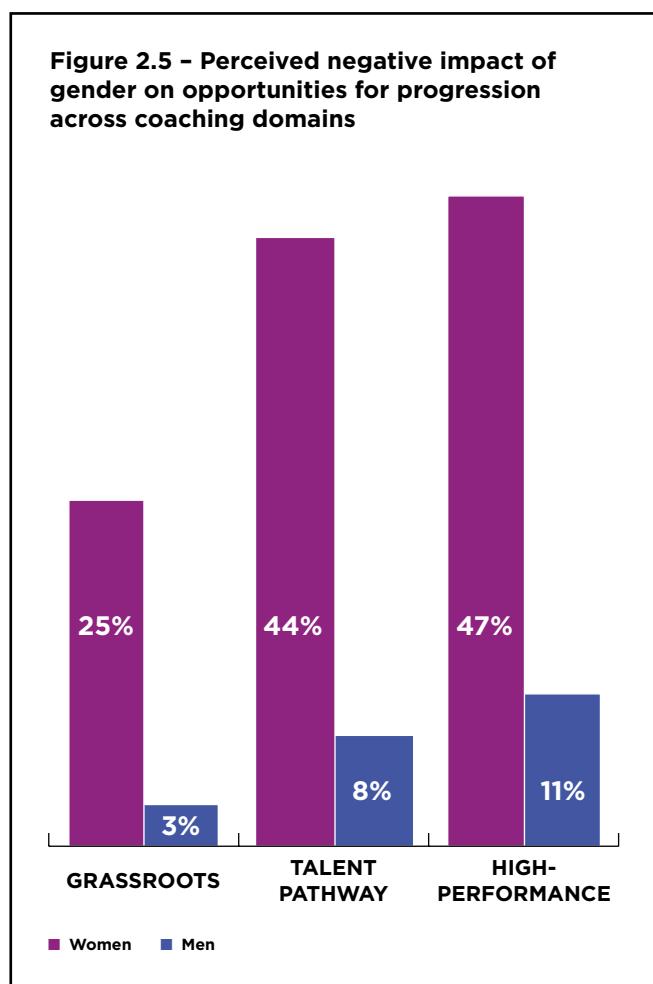
Considering the findings on PDPs, feedback and progression conversations, it is clear that coach development is not functioning well, and this is especially disadvantageous to women. This is not necessarily about implementing expensive performance management systems; it is also about culture change and recognising the need to give coach development higher priority. Organisations can benefit from placing greater focus on relationship building and fostering high-quality conversations. These conversations help coaches feel heard and provide space to explore the support and development they need to thrive.



### REALITY 2.3

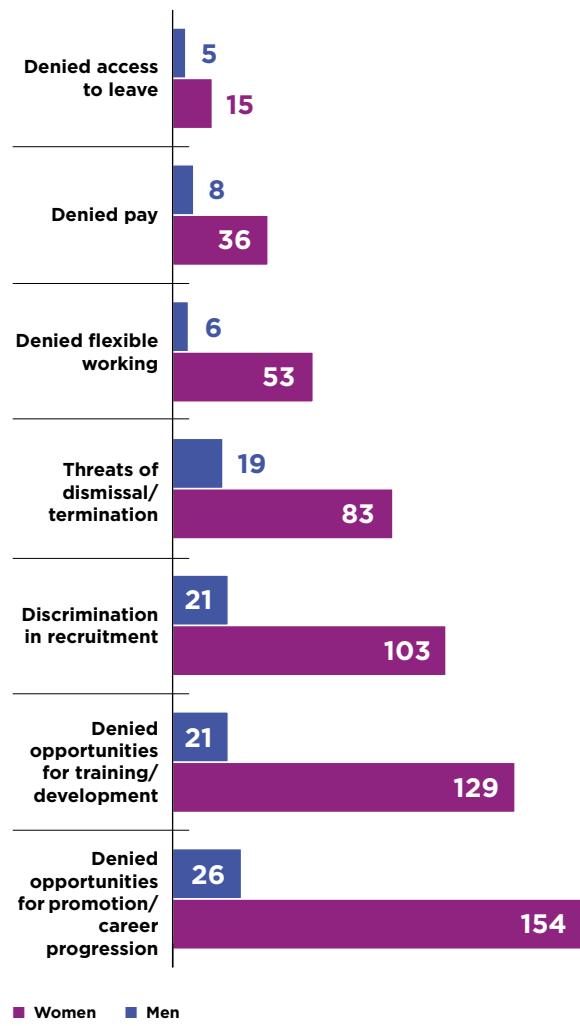
## Sex discrimination inhibits progression for women.

Sex discrimination refers to unfair treatment based on sex, often rooted in misogyny and gender stereotyping. Here, we explore the prevalence of perceived sex discrimination and its effects on women in coaching. Overall, 38% of women believe that their gender negatively impacts their opportunities for progression compared to just 7% of men. Figure 2.5 shows that the impact of this bias becomes more pronounced the higher women progress through the coaching domains.



Overall, 36% of women coaches reported discrimination in their careers, compared to 12% of men. This wide disparity in prevalence highlights how women are disproportionately affected across multiple aspects of their employment and career progression (Figure 2.6). These experiences reflect and reinforce existing gender inequality which limits women's opportunities for progression and their ability to thrive in their coaching role. These systemic barriers must be addressed directly and decisively in order to drive meaningful change and strengthen gender equality across the sector.

**Figure 2.6 - No. of coaches reporting types of discrimination**

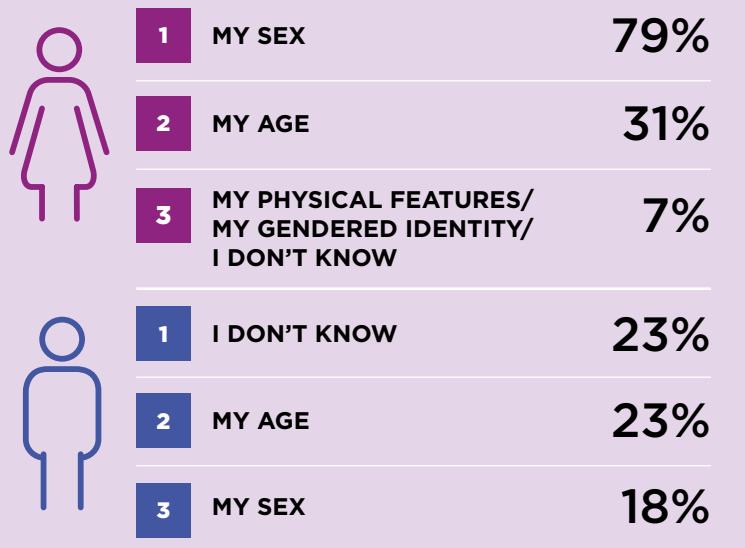


**5 TIMES**  
**MORE WOMEN THAN MEN**  
**REPORTED BEING DENIED**  
**ACCESS TO PROMOTION/**  
**CAREER PROGRESSION AND**  
**TRAINING/DEVELOPMENT**

## REASONS FOR DISCRIMINATION

Of those who have experienced discrimination, Figure 2.7 shows the top three perceived reasons cited by coaches. Respondents chose from options including sex, race, ethnic/cultural background, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, socio-economic background, and parent/carer status.

**Figure 2.7 - Top three perceived reasons for discrimination**



79% of women coaches believe they experienced discrimination as a result of their sex, making it their most substantial career barrier. Three times fewer male coaches reported discrimination and it was rarely linked to their sex, highlighting a stark imbalance in how both groups are treated.

Age, whether perceived as “too old” or “too young”, is the second most common factor linked to discrimination in progression for women and men, but once again, more women coaches are affected (31% vs 23%), highlighting another layer of inequality that compounds the challenges they already experience in the sector.

## BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PROGRESSION

Figure 2.8 shows that the majority of CEOs cite the lack of flexibility in coaching roles as the primary barrier to women thriving in their careers. 44% acknowledged the ongoing presence of misogyny and sexism, 24% acknowledge the presence of discrimination in progression and recruitment. This discrepancy suggests that more than half of leaders don't understand how deeply misogyny and sexism is embedded in the culture and systems across the sector. Such a gap in awareness highlights the need for organisations to reflect critically on their practices and take effective action to address these behaviours and the underlying systemic inequalities that hold women back.

**I started coaching and loved it, progressing and doing great work. After many years I started noticing that a lot of the guys who had qualified and gained experience working for and alongside me started to get top jobs, but I wasn't considered to be good enough for these permanent roles when I applied. I decided that trying to make coaching a career was a waste of my time and I should put my energy into something else.”**

Woman, Community Coach

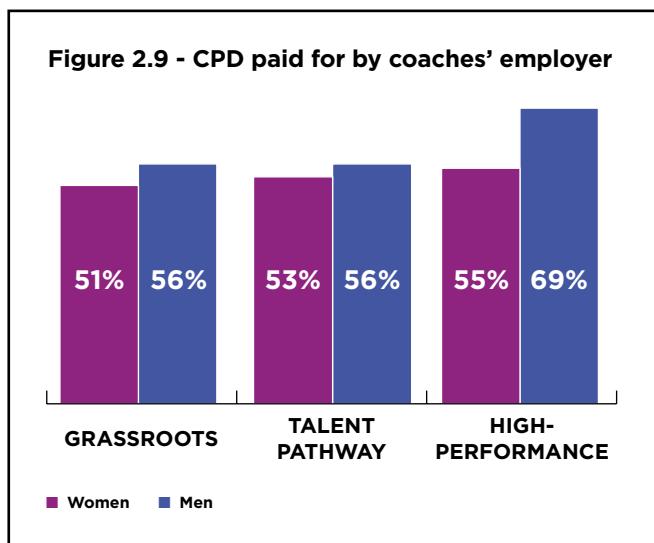
**Figure 2.8 - Biggest barriers to women coaches thriving and progressing in their career according to CEOs**



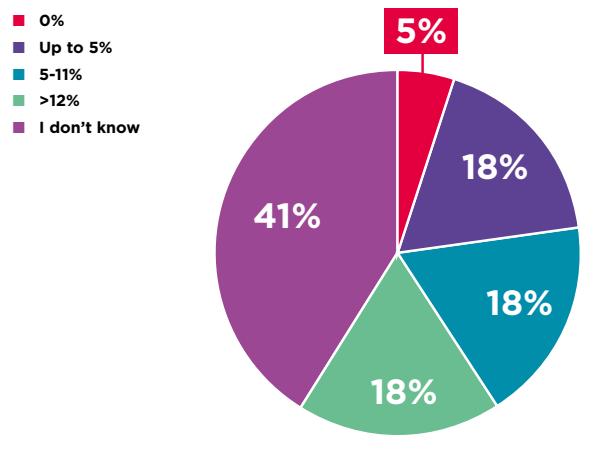
## REALITY 2.4

### Coach development is underfunded, with women impacted most.

Professional development is the cornerstone of performance and progression in sport. However, our survey results suggest significant underfunding of coach development overall (Figure 2.9), with circa 40% of coaches left to navigate and pay for their own development. Of all respondents, 54% of men and 49% of women coaches had their CPD paid for by their employer. Women in high performance sport are significantly less likely to have their CPD paid for by their employer. CEOs appear to be aware of this underfunding for women coaches, with only 32% of CEOs believing they have set aside a meaningful budget to attract, develop, and retain more women coaches: 68% recognise they haven't.



**Figure 2.10 - What percentage of the coach workforce budget is ringfenced for coach development - Heads of Coaching Workforce**



Absolute coaching budgets naturally vary between organisations, and responses from Heads of Coaching Workforce indicate that the proportion allocated to CPD also differs (Figure 2.10). What is evident is that access to CPD is not consistent across coaches.

Women coaches are already at a relative disadvantage in this system, and the fragmented structure can make progression more challenging. For many coaches, the quality and continuity of their development is heavily influenced by their sex as well as other factors, including the ability to self-fund.

## CONCLUSION

Coaching attracts individuals for a variety of reasons, from volunteering to pursuing structured pathways that lead to working with elite and world-class athletes. While formal licensing and accreditation pathways are well defined, career pathways often remain unclear, resulting in a fragmented approach to professional development and unequal opportunities for coaches to grow and advance.

Many coaches report that their professional development is not prioritised, with limited access to feedback and progression-planning conversations. Four in five women coaches said that they had faced sex discrimination in areas including recruitment and progression. Gender bias and sex discrimination remain embedded within the sector, a reality acknowledged by many senior leaders, although fewer than half of responding CEOs recognise this issue.

Unequal access to funded continuing professional development affects women coaches at all levels, with the greatest gap evident among those working in high-performance contexts. Coach development should be a higher priority for organisations, with women and men having equal access to opportunities, professional development, and career progression.



# 3

# Culture and Inclusion

## REALITY 3.1

Coaches' sense of belonging is shaped by their personal characteristics and working environment.

- Experiencing belonging is influenced by many factors, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.
- Overall, women report feeling a lower sense of belonging than men.

## REALITY 3.4

Women are less likely than men to feel comfortable being their authentic selves while coaching.

- Women often experience isolation in the male-dominated systems, limiting the opportunity to build meaningful relationships.
- Women coaches report feeling less able to be themselves at work.

## REALITY 3.2

Bias fuels negative assumptions about the competence and abilities of female coaches.

- Many women coaches face challenges in how they are seen, and how their contributions are recognised.

## REALITY 3.5

Negative cultural experiences impact the retention of women coaches.

- Women coaches are in the minority, particularly in talent pathway and high-performance.
- Lapsed women coaches cite not feeling valued as a top reason for leaving coaching.

## REALITY 3.3

Women coaches feel less heard and valued in their coaching environment.

- Women coaches feel their voices are marginalised and ignored, diminishing their contributions and reinforcing patriarchal culture.
- Women coaches feel less valued than their male counterparts.

## REALITY 3.6

The Boards and Senior Leadership Teams surveyed are predominantly male.

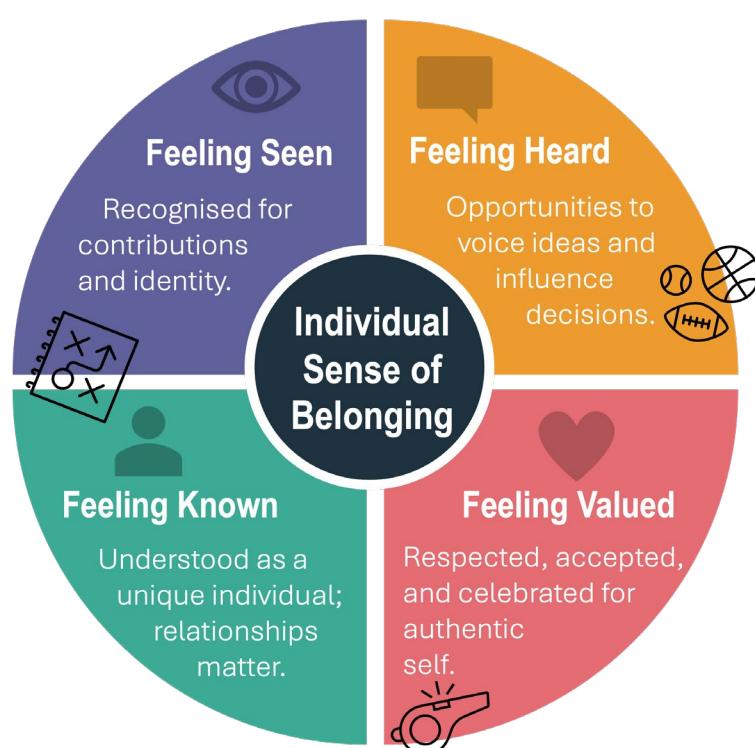
- Gender balance remains an issue at Board and Senior Leadership level, despite recent progress.
- Gender equality conversations are not sufficiently embedded in the culture of sports leadership.

## Introduction

A strong organisational culture is the foundation of an equitable workplace, shaping how people interact and whose voices are heard, valued, and amplified. When organisations intentionally foster a culture that challenges bias, they create an environment where gender equality is not just an aspiration but a lived reality that fuels performance, innovation, and long-term success. To develop a comprehensive view of coaching culture, we analysed how coaches experience the culture and how leaders shape and reinforce this. In this section, the coaches' voice is presented first, followed by the organisational perspective.

To better understand how coaches experience culture, the survey invited participants to reflect through four lenses (Figure 3.1) or 'anchors' that reflect the different but interconnected ways people gain a sense of connection, security, and support through a place and/or people. We explore how these dimensions operate in practice and in relation to each other, and how cultural factors create unequal experiences for women and men.

**Figure 3.1 - The Anchors of Belonging Framework<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup>Stride, A., Norman, L., Fitzgerald, H., Clarke, N.J., Bates, D., Drury, S., Hoole, A., Lawrence, S., Marks, K., Stodter, A. and McGoldrick, M. (2025) 'The Power of Belonging: Reframing Notions of Inclusion in Sport', *Sport in Society*, pp. 1-16. ISSN 1743-0437 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2025.2492631>

### REALITY 3.1

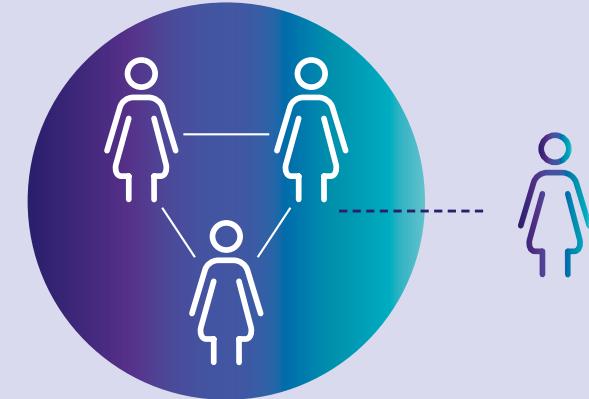
## Coaches' sense of belonging is shaped by their personal characteristics and working environment.

Belonging means feeling valued, respected, and able to contribute fully to the role and the organisation's activities. Coaches' sense of belonging in our survey varies depending on their circumstances and working environment. For instance:

- Women coaches' sense of belonging is the highest in grassroots coaching (76%) and the lowest in high-performance environments (68%).
- Both women and men coaches experience a decrease in belonging when working in professional clubs.
- 63% of disabled women coaches felt a sense of belonging, compared to 77% of disabled men coaches.
- Among coaches from ethnically diverse backgrounds, both women and men experience decreases in belonging scores, with men showing a more pronounced decline than women.

This highlights the importance of understanding intersectionality and how layers of exclusion work. What fosters a sense of belonging for one person may not be effective for another, even among those with similar backgrounds. For cultural change to genuinely enable inclusion, organisations must recognise and respond to these differences, adopting a responsive and understanding approach that ensures all individuals feel valued, supported, and able to participate fully.

**Figure 3.1 - Women coaches who feel a sense of belonging**



Overall, 72% of women coaches feel a sense of belonging, compared to 81% of male coaches. While it is positive that almost three in four women report a sense of belonging (Figure 3.1), one in four still feel they do not fully belong. The findings that follow provide insight as to the reasons that may contribute to this.

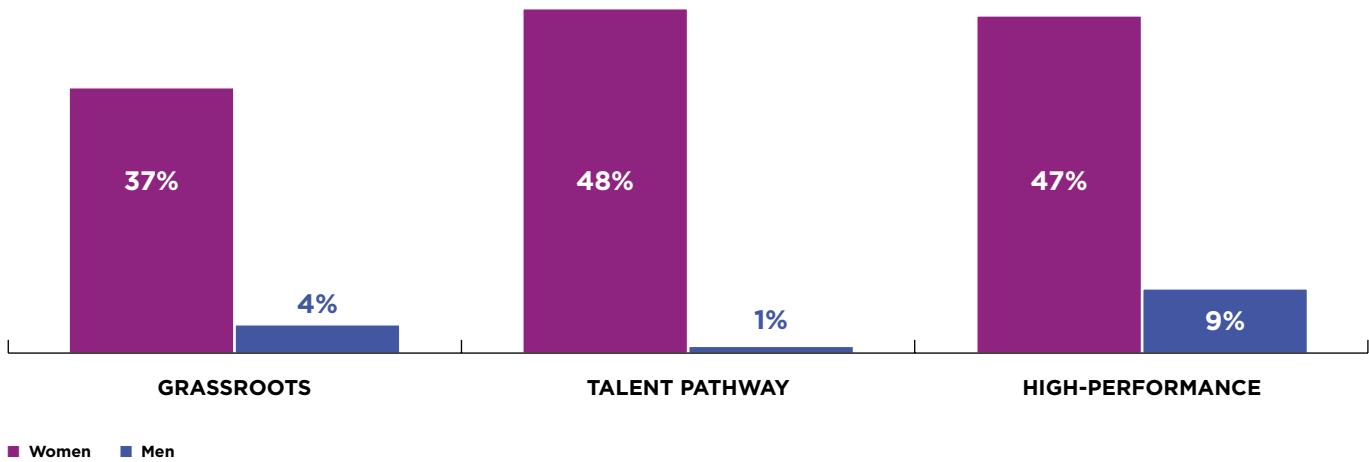
**39% OF WOMEN BELIEVE THEIR GENDER NEGATIVELY AFFECTS HOW OTHERS PERCEIVE THEIR ABILITY AND COMPETENCE, COMPARED TO JUST 5% OF MEN**

### REALITY 3.2

## Bias fuels negative assumptions about the competence and abilities of female coaches.

Gender bias is hard-wired in our society and the sporting system continues to be heavily male-dominated, setting the tone, culture and expectations of what a coach looks like and how a coach behaves. In this context, women coaches face challenges in how they are seen and how their contributions are recognised. Negative assumptions about women's competence undermine their legitimacy in coaching; women's expertise and achievements are routinely under-acknowledged.

**Figure 3.2 - Coaches who believe their gender negatively impacts perceptions of their ability and competence by coaching domain**



Around four in ten women believe their gender negatively affects how their ability and competence are perceived in coaching. Women consistently report higher rates than men (Figure 3.2). These perceptions not only undermine self-worth but also restrict opportunities for career progression and full inclusion within the coaching environment.

If women coaches' competencies are consistently undervalued, they cannot be expected to compete fairly within a system that is already biased against them. It is therefore unsurprising that representation remains low when women must continually confront this implicit bias, having to work harder than their male counterparts simply to prove their worth and be considered for roles. There is a notable increase as women progress into more senior coaching roles (Figure 3.2), which may be related to the increased scrutiny and heightened expectations that accompany these positions, which are also typically more male-dominated.

**I've had to stand up for myself... I'm not here to make the tea."**

Woman, Community Coach

**Women... should be valued on their merits. It's no wonder there are far fewer women in coaching than men."**

Woman, Amateur Coach



### REALITY 3.3

## Women coaches feel less heard and valued in their coaching environment.

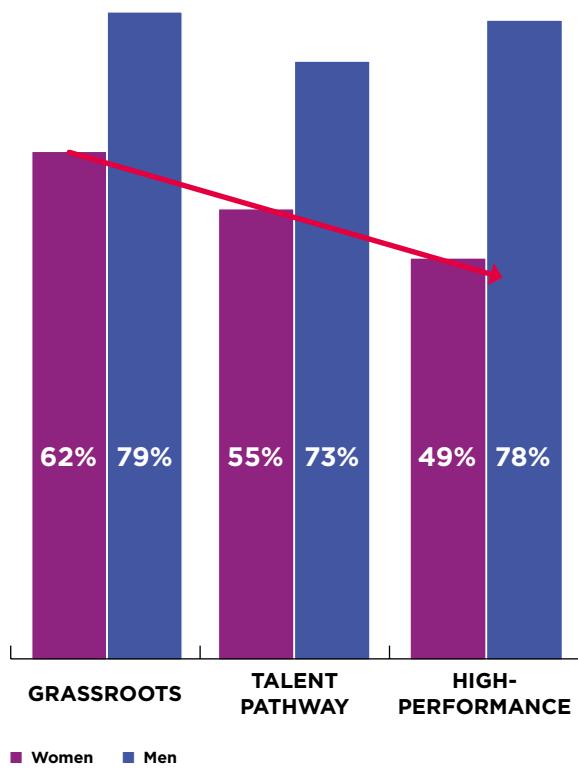
Overall, 18% fewer women than men feel their opinions are **heard and respected** in their coaching environment. Women's voices continue to be marginalised, diminishing their contributions and perpetuating a patriarchal environment where gender inequality is implicitly tolerated. This hinders efforts to create a truly equitable culture. A closer examination across coaching domains also reveals a clear trend. That is, the further women coaches progress, the less their voices are heard and respected (Figure 3.3), with the result that their influence is diminished, thereby reinforcing a male-dominant hierarchy within the sector. This dynamic limits the diversity of perspectives provided, entrenches existing power structures that favour men, maintains belief systems and contributes to the ongoing underrepresentation of women in senior coaching roles.

**61% OF WOMEN FEEL HEARD AND RESPECTED, COMPARED TO 79% OF MEN**

**67% OF WOMEN FEEL VALUED IN THEIR COACH SETTING, COMPARED TO 79% OF MEN**



**Figure 3.3 - Coaches who feel their opinions are heard and respected across coaching domain**



When coaches are not listened to, it signals that their contributions are not valued, leading to feelings of exclusion. In our survey, 67% of women coaches said they felt valued compared to 79% of men. Other signs that women coaches may be less valued are the disadvantages they face in accessing support for progression or continued professional development, as shown in section two of this report.

Feeling respected and feeling valued are intrinsically linked. Women coaches are more likely to perceive that their gender negatively impacts the respect they are afforded at work (34%) compared to men (5%). Together respect, value, and voice form the foundation of belonging, and the gaps observed here highlight where cultural change is most needed.

### REALITY 3.4

## Women are less likely than men to feel comfortable being their authentic selves while coaching.

Women coaches often work in predominantly male environments and are less likely than men to strongly agree that they feel at ease with themselves when coaching. Not feeling understood and not showing up authentically can inhibit the building of trust and meaningful relationships with colleagues. Women's opportunities to build supportive networks are already limited by the lack of fellow women; women coaches can experience isolation as the 'only woman' in the coaching team.

In an environment where women coaches' competence is constantly questioned, their voices are marginalised and they feel 'othered', women's self-belief can be systematically eroded, diminishing their ability to thrive. If they are unable to be their genuine selves at work, it becomes much harder to fully engage, contribute, and grow.



**It is a heavily male dominated environment which can be incredibly intimidating as a female. I am quite thick skinned, but I can see how it would put other females off pursuing a coaching career or feeling brave enough to stand their ground in such a male environment.”**

Woman, Talent Pathway Coach

**51% OF MEN STRONGLY AGREE THAT THEY FEEL AT EASE WITH THEMSELVES WHEN COACHING COMPARED TO 37% OF WOMEN**

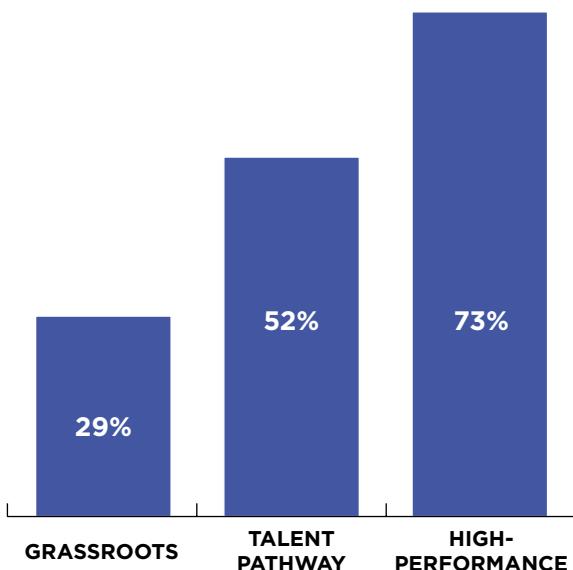


### REALITY 3.5

## Negative cultural experiences impact the retention of women coaches.

Women continue to be underrepresented in coaching; the Heads of Coaching Workforce who responded to our survey confirm that across all coaching domains, women were in the minority within their sport, particularly in talent pathway and high-performance.

**Figure 3.4 – % of organisations with less than 20% of coaches who are women, by coaching domain**



Many organisations reported representation levels below 20% (Figure 3.4) with three quarters of respondents reporting that less than 1 in 5 coaches were female in high-performance in their organisation. This significant underrepresentation of women in coaching is recognised at senior levels with 74% of CEO respondents stating that their Board is dissatisfied with the gender balance and diversity of its coaching workforce.

For women who had left coaching (i.e. lapsed coaches), not feeling valued is cited as a top reason (40%). Perceptions of being valued and having opinions heard and respected were very low for lapsed women coaches compared to active women coaches (Figure 3.5). The same trend was not evident for lapsed men coaches, suggesting that these cultural factors are key drivers of exit for women.

**There are plenty that respect me, those that don't are a minority. However, that minority have a ripple effect on my coaching.”**

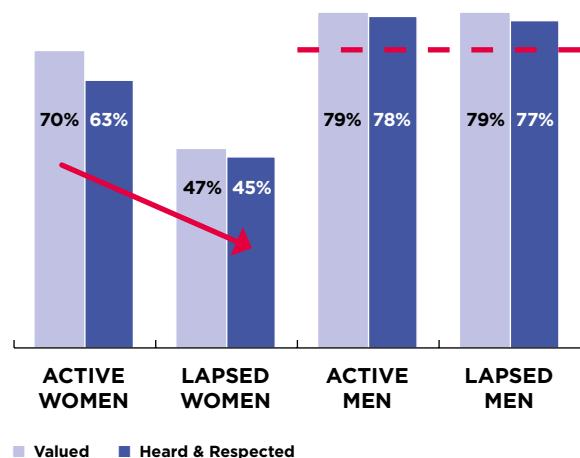
Woman, Community Coach

**I do it for the kids, the enjoyment I get from them developing is amazing. It's the politics and the negative behaviours that spoil it.”**

Woman, Community Coach

Importantly, this also represents a positive opportunity. Just under a third (30%) of lapsed women indicated they would consider returning to coaching, which suggests that addressing cultural barriers, ensuring women feel valued, heard, and respected, could play a critical role in re-engaging talent and strengthening diversity within the coaching workforce.

**Figure 3.5 – Feel valued and opinions heard and respected – active vs lapsed coaches**



## REALITY 3.6

### The Boards and Senior Leadership Teams surveyed are predominantly male.

To reform culture and make faster progress towards a coaching workforce reflective of society will require leadership at all levels. Vitally this must be prioritised at the top of the organisation where the underlying culture is set. Leaders' attitudes and approaches to gender equality shape how others understand the issue and determine whether it is treated with urgency. The presence of women in leadership roles, particularly those that are most influential in shaping organisational culture is essential. In this survey, 23% of the Chairs and 19% of the Vice/Deputy Chairs are women, which aligns with a recent survey of the top 20 sports in the UK, which showed that across the roles of CEO, Chair, and Performance Director, just 24% were women.<sup>2</sup>

Progress has been made in increasing the gender balance of non-executives following the introduction by the Sports Councils of a grant condition (30% minimum of each sex) but less attention has focused on gender balance in the executive until recently.

Of the CEOs we surveyed 48% recognise that gender imbalance is a continuing problem for their Boards but only 38% were concerned about the balance on their executive leadership team, although the majority reported that both their senior teams and Boards were predominantly male. This may be explained partly by funders historically showing less interest in the diversity of the executive than the non-executive and by the nature of the change required, given that vacancies for executive roles may be few and far between where turnover is low.

In terms of the diversity of the women in non-executive or senior executive roles, 60% of CEOs

surveyed said women on their Board are either somewhat or quite diverse whereas only 40% said this was true for the senior leadership team. This is a common pattern across many sectors. 8% of respondents to our coaching survey are from ethnically diverse backgrounds, compared to around 18% of the UK population.

Equitable decision-making can help progress towards a coaching workforce that is more reflective of society. This requires Boards and Senior Leadership Teams to foster environments in which gender equality conversations occur regularly at all levels of the organisation. However, in this survey sample, it was apparent that conversations about gender equality are not typically embedded in sports culture.

Meaningful conversations about equality are a critical first step in addressing gender inequality, as they provide the space to identify issues, challenge assumptions, and ensure that the right action is taken. Women are more likely to engage fully when they feel understood, are confident their voices will be heard, their perspectives valued, and action taken. Board and senior leaders should make these conversations routine, not reactive.

Figure 3.6 illustrates the frequency with which Heads of Coaching Workforces report they have gender equality conversations. While it is positive that 5% encompass gender equality conversations in day-to-day interactions and an additional 30% regularly speak about gender equality, it is concerning that these conversations are not more frequent for the majority.

**Figure 3.6 - Frequency of gender equality conversations - Heads of Coaching Workforce**



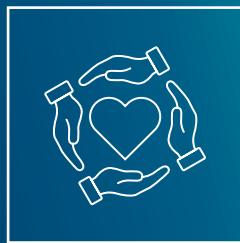
Such honest conversations can bring about change at multiple levels, enabling women to articulate what they need in order to thrive, making it easier to name and challenge unacceptable behaviours and creating space to raise and address key issues. Without taking the time for these conversations, action may be based on assumptions about what leaders perceive women need, rather than reflecting what they actually do need.

## CONCLUSION

Women coaches reported that their sex led others to perceive them as less competent. They also feel less valued, heard, and respected, with these inequalities most acutely experienced in high-performance coaching environments. As a result, women's visibility, influence, and career progression are diminished. Women remain significantly under-represented in coaching at all levels, with feeling undervalued identified as the primary reason for leaving the sector. Ultimately, fewer women than men report a sense of belonging within coaching.

If the sector is committed to building a gender-balanced and diverse workforce, it must start at the top, ensuring leadership is reflective of society. Although some organisations are making progress in this area, cultural change is needed to ensure women's input and experiences are valued, as feeling heard and respected is fundamental to increasing women's representation in coaching.





# 4

# Keeping Coaches Safe from Harm

## REALITY 4.1

Harm is widespread in coaching, but significantly worse for women.

- Women are much more likely than men to experience bullying and harassment and slightly more likely to face aggression and violence.
- Perpetrators of bullying and harassment against women are most likely to be fellow coaches and, for men, management, whereas parents are more likely to be the perpetrators of aggression and violence against both women and men.

## REALITY 4.4

Safeguarding systems are not serving coaches well, least of all women.

- While most (91%) organisations have reporting systems in place, the system is failing for some coaches.
- The reporting of incidents of harm and overall satisfaction with investigation outcomes is low.

## REALITY 4.2

Sex is the most cited perceived reason across all forms of harm for women.

- Sex is consistently cited as the primary reason for women experiencing harmful behaviours.
- This is compounded by age, whether someone is perceived as “too” young or “too” old.

## REALITY 4.5

There is a lack of trust in safeguarding systems.

- Heads of Coaching Workforce are aware that there is not adequate trust in safeguarding systems, particularly among women coaches; CEOs appear less aware of this.

## REALITY 4.3

Unspoken cultural rules often silence victims, and women are most impacted.

- The coping strategies female coaches adopt can limit their lives, such as avoiding perpetrators (who are mostly fellow coaches) and places where harassment may have occurred.
- The great majority of coaches who suffer harm are more likely to adopt coping strategies than to report it.

## REALITY 4.6

There are inadequate policies to tackle misogyny and protect women in coaching.

- Few of the sports organisations surveyed had policies dedicated to addressing gender violence or misogyny across the workforce.

## Introduction

The sports sector has faced a number of athlete abuse crises, and much work is underway to improve athlete welfare. Our survey shows that coaches are also experiencing unacceptable and significant levels of abuse, albeit in different forms and different contexts. An excessively high proportion of the coaches we surveyed reported some form of harm, whether this be bullying, harassment, aggression and violence with female coaches disproportionately affected. The analysis in this section seeks to understand the scale of the issue, perceptions around causes and experiences of reporting systems. It also examines organisational commitment to fostering cultures that are safe, respectful and supportive.

### REALITY 4.1

#### **Harm is widespread in coaching and significantly worse for women.**

##### **PREVALENCE OF HARMFUL EXPERIENCES**

Understanding the prevalence and nature of harmful experiences is critical to raising awareness and creating cultures where coaches can thrive without fear of mistreatment.

Coaches report experiencing harm at alarming levels:

- 30% of women coaches report bullying (15% of men)
- 21% of women report harassment (12% of men)
- 22% of women report aggression and violence (19% of men)

It is clear that harmful behaviours are widespread across the sector and not caused by just a few individuals. These figures highlight the urgent need for stronger protections for coaches, particularly women.



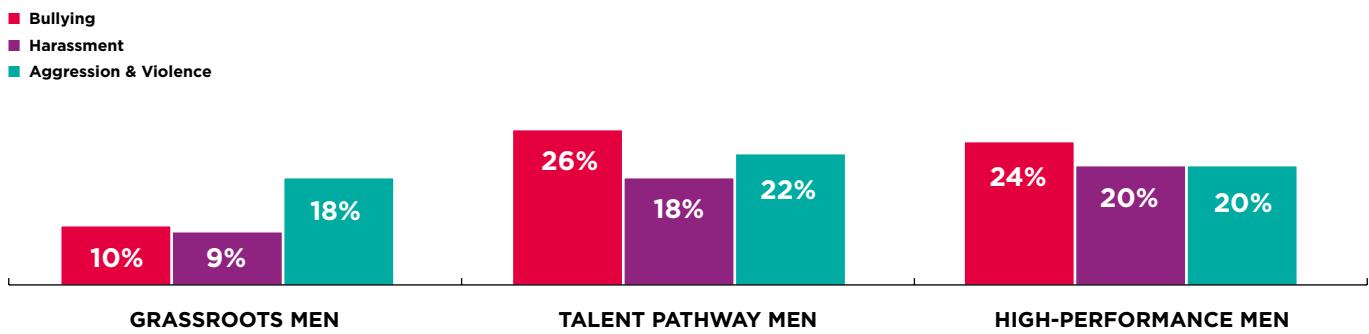
## THE HUMAN IMPACT OF HARM

Of the 1352 women and 640 men who completed the survey:

404 women and  
98 men experienced  
**Bullying**

285 women and  
77 men experienced  
**Harassment**

294 women and  
120 men experienced  
**Aggression and violence**

**Figure 4.1 - Prevalence of harmful experiences by domain - all female coaches****Figure 4.2 - Prevalence of harmful experiences by domain - all male coaches**

Looking at how harm occurs across different coaching domains (Figures 4.1 and 4.2):

- For women, prevalence shows an upward trend for all forms of harm across Grassroots, Talent Pathway and High Performance.
- Bullying is the most prevalent form of harm for women in all domains, with one in four women in Grassroots, more than one in three in Talent Pathway and nearly one in two in High-Performance reporting bullying.
- For men, overall, the most prevalent form of harm is aggression and violence, although reports of bullying are highest in Talent Pathway and High-Performance.

These insights illustrate that harmful experiences remain a significant concern for coaches and particularly for women, despite the fact that 95% of Heads of Coaching Workforces agree that “We have a zero-tolerance policy on sexist, bullying and violent behaviours towards women in our organisation.”

Harm is persisting and this needs to be addressed at a cultural and system level. The disparities among different coaching domains point to underlying cultural and structural factors that may amplify risks in more competitive environments, where power dynamics and organisational pressures are heightened.



## HOW HARM MANIFESTS

To understand how harm manifests we explored how common types of bullying, harassment, and aggression and violence are experienced by coaches. Raw numbers are presented in this section rather than percentages, as this approach highlights the volume of reported experiences among men and women and avoids minimising their impact. It should be noted that twice as many women than men completed our survey.

### Bullying

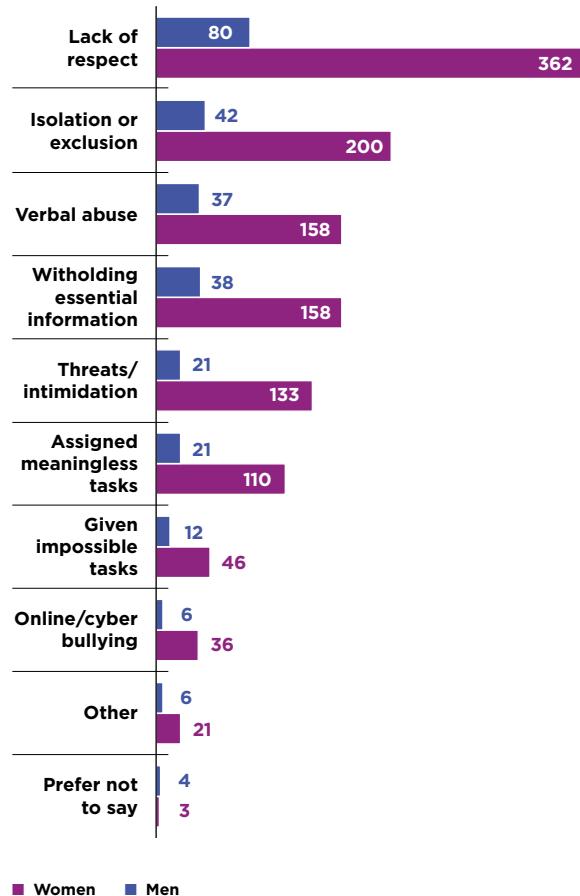
Taking sample size into account twice as many women as men report experiencing all types of bullying. The most common form of bullying experienced by coaches is a lack of respect, with women reporting this substantially more often supporting the findings in Section 3 (Figure 4.3). The second most reported form of bullying is isolation or exclusion, pointing to a concerning trend for women in particular, who may feel more socially and/or professionally marginalised within their coaching environments, which can impact confidence, collaboration, and career progression.

Women are also more likely than men to report verbal abuse and the withholding of essential information to do their job, potentially impacting both their wellbeing and their ability to work effectively in their role. A significant number of women experienced threats and intimidation, with men also reporting this at much lower levels.



**Figure 4.3 - No. of coaches reporting different types of bullying**

(total reporting bullying = 404 women, 98 men)



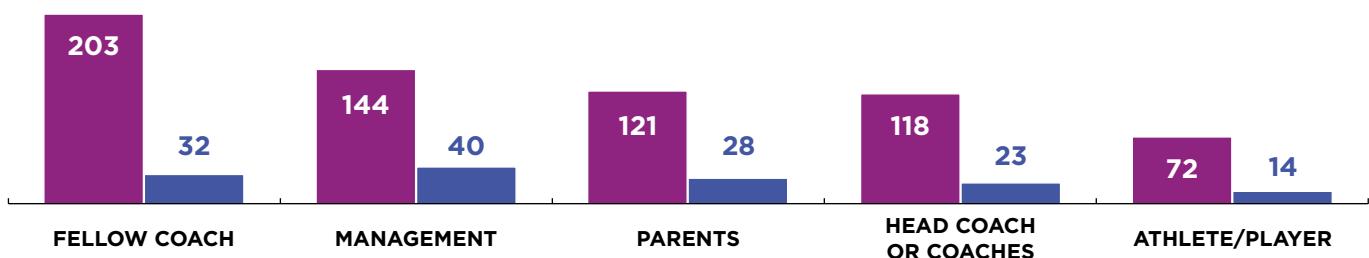
When asked about the sex of the perpetrators, both men and women report this to be mainly 'a man or group of men'.

In terms of who carried out the bullying, fellow coaches were most likely to be responsible for bullying women. For men, perpetrators were more likely to be management (Figure 4.4).

**Figure 4.4 - Main perpetrators of bullying**

(total reporting bullying = 404 women, 98 men)

■ Women ■ Men



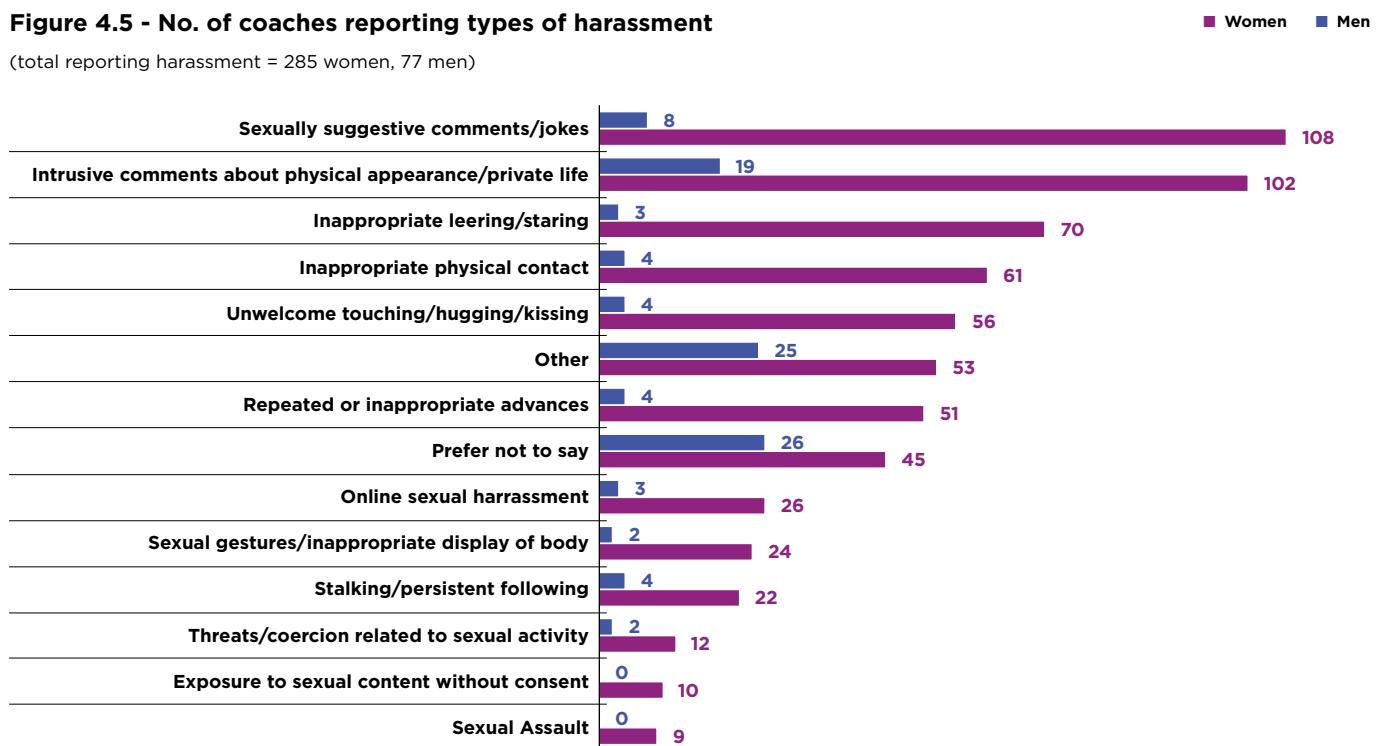
## Harassment

Figure 4.5 shows that significantly more women report experiencing all forms of harassment than men, and this often has strong sexualised, personal and threatening dimensions, creating environments that can feel deeply unsafe. For male coaches reporting harassment, the nature of this was less clear, with the most common response being “prefer not to say” or “other”.



**Figure 4.5 - No. of coaches reporting types of harassment**

(total reporting harassment = 285 women, 77 men)

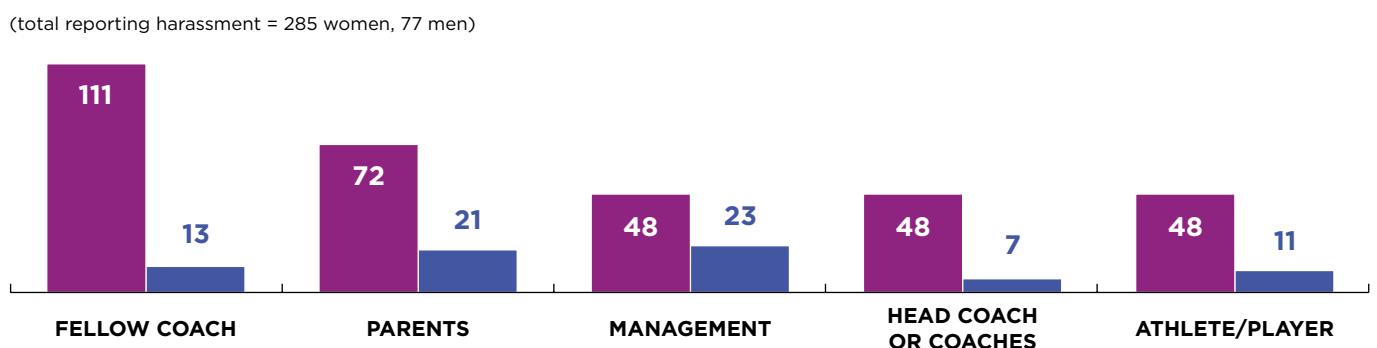


With regards to the perpetrators of harassment, women reported this to be mainly ‘a man or group of men’. However, men are equally likely to report that the perpetrators were ‘a man or group of men’ and ‘both men and women’.

As with bullying, fellow coaches are most likely responsible for harassment of women and for men, management followed by parents for both men and women (Figure 4.6).

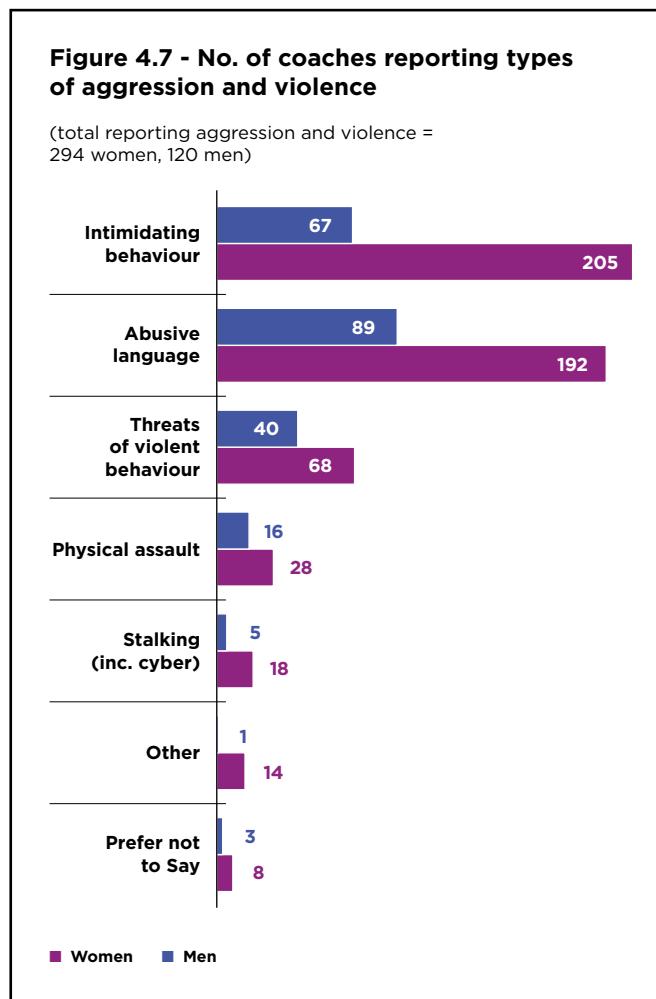
**Figure 4.6 - Main perpetrators of harassment**

(total reporting harassment = 285 women, 77 men)



## Aggression and Violence

A high proportion of coaches report aggression and violence overall, with less variation by sex than bullying and harassment (Figure 4.7). The top three behaviours reported by both men and women are intimidating behaviour, abusive language, and threats of violence.

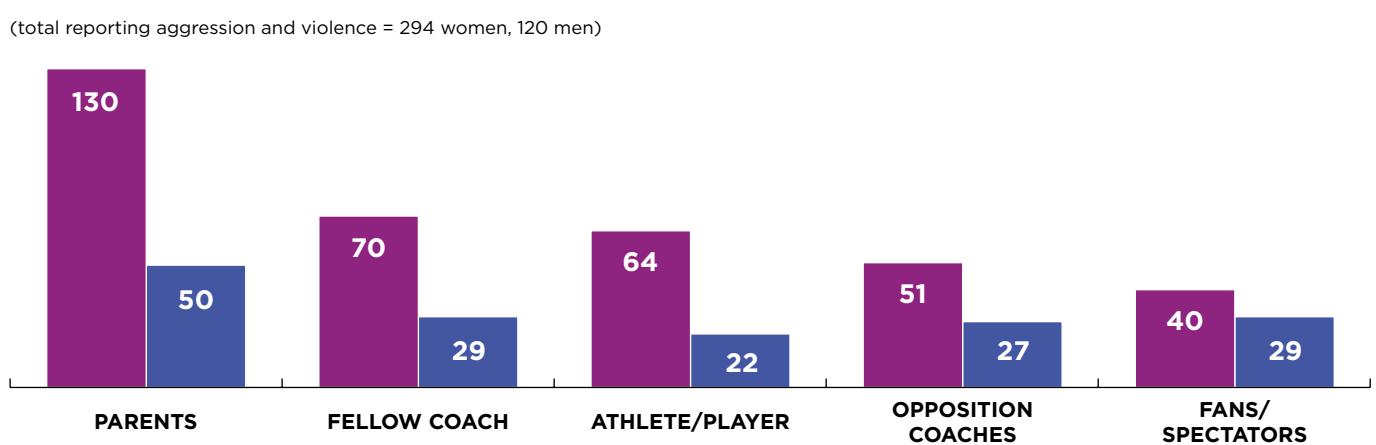


Similar to bullying and harassment, both men and women report the perpetrators to be mainly 'a man or group of men'.

However, unlike other forms of harm, both male and female coaches report the main perpetrators of aggression and violence to be parents, followed by a fellow coach for women, and fellow coaches and fans/spectators for men (Figure 4.8).

Taken together, these findings show that not only is there a higher prevalence of bullying and harassment among women, but that the perpetrators are mostly other coaches for women. This is not the case for men. And while men may be perceived as threatening to male coaches, women are often more physically vulnerable to male violence. Given the sexualised nature of the harassment they experience and the wider patterns of misogyny evident, coaching environments can feel particularly unsafe, threatening, and devaluing for women. This inhibits women coaches' participation and ability to thrive.

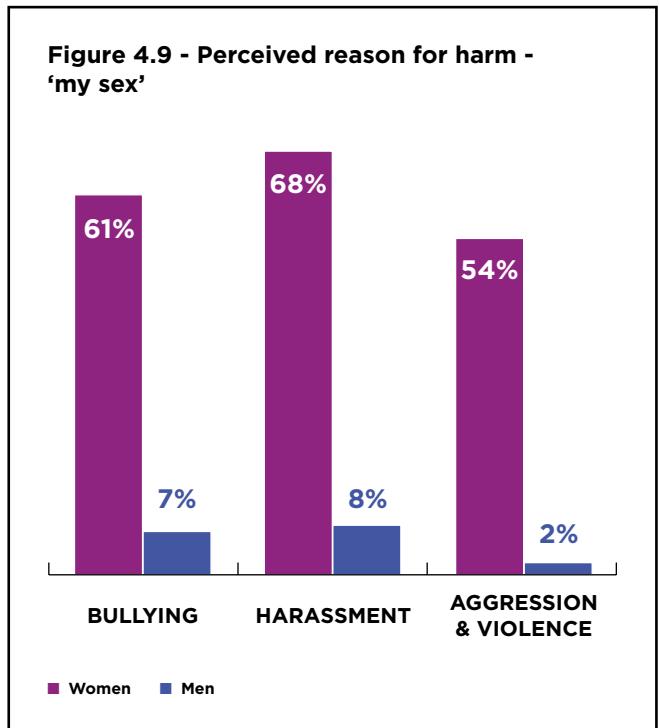
**Figure 4.8 - Main perpetrators of aggression and violence**



## REALITY 4.2

### Sex is the most cited perceived reason across all forms of harm for women.

If we consider the underlying reasons for harm, a clearer picture emerges. Women cite their sex as the most common reason across all forms of harm explored, reflecting the ongoing and persistent influence of sexism and misogyny within coaching cultures (Figure 4.9).



These insights illustrate that harmful behaviours in coaching environments are rarely random. The majority of women coaches attribute all forms of harm mostly to their sex, suggesting it is part of the systemic power inequality between the sexes.

Age also appears as a recurring factor for women in particular, with 29% saying age lay behind bullying (16% men), 27% harassment (16% men) and 22% aggression and violence (7% men), suggesting that stereotypes about competence create compounding vulnerabilities for women, particularly when they are perceived as too young or too old.

For men, harmful behaviours are less frequently linked to their sex or age, with many expressing uncertainties about motives. This ambiguity reflects differences in how harm is experienced. Across all forms of harm, on average 31% of men and 25% of women gave the perceived reason for harm as 'other'. This included: jealousy; being seen as a threat; not having been a prior athlete/player; and as a result of taking action or speaking up.



**[The organisation] need to do thorough checks on who they're hiring... not only myself but I know other women who've also faced aggressive comments just because of their age. It's not okay at all - this is how we lose women."**

Woman, Talent Pathway Coach



## REALITY 4.3

### Unspoken cultural rules often silence victims.

Experiencing harm in coaching environments does not often lead to formal reporting or confrontation. Instead, many coaches naturally adopt coping strategies to minimise conflict. The most prevalent of these reported by coaches are avoiding perpetrators and locations, and emotional self-silencing.

#### Avoiding Perpetrator(s)

Many coaches understandably prioritise personal safety by distancing themselves from those responsible. Avoiding perpetrators was one of the most common strategies taken by coaches who experienced harmful behaviours.

- Nearly half of women coaches reported steering clear of individuals responsible for bullying or harassment (49% respectively), with similar patterns for aggression and violence (40%).
- Men also avoided perpetrators (37% after bullying and around 30% following harassment or aggression).

#### Avoiding Locations

Avoiding locations where harm occurred or might occur is less frequent but still notable, especially among women coaches.

- Around 30% of women who experienced harm reported avoiding spaces after harassment, and 23% after bullying and aggression.
- For those men affected by harm, these behaviours are less common, with only 16% avoiding locations after bullying and even fewer following harassment or aggression and violence.

#### Emotional Self-Silencing

A significant proportion of coaches, both women and men, reported coping by “laughing it off” or pretending incidents did not bother them, revealing that harmful behaviour can be minimised rather than confronted. Self-silencing becomes a way to avoid judgment, shame, or backlash and is often prevalent in cultures which intentionally or unintentionally discourage confronting bad behaviour.

While 30% of both men and women report “laughing it off” after bullying, the responses of men and women to harassment and to aggression and violence differed:

- 38% of women who experienced harassment said they “laughed it off”, whereas men who experienced this were less likely to do so (27%).
- 34% of men said they “laughed off” aggression and violence, whereas women were less likely to do so (23%).



**I have experienced it a few times, so I have either laughed it off or defended myself or stand up for myself.”**

Woman, High-Performance Coach

These findings suggest that the bullying and harassment of women, and aggression and violence towards men, are normalised behaviours.

Bearing in mind the scale of women coaches suffering harm (nearly one in three are bullied for example and one in five harassed) and considering that other coaches are the primary perpetrators of bullying and harassment of female coaches, avoiding perpetrators may have a particularly isolating impact on women. Given that 30% of women in our total sample reported bullying and half of these said they avoided the perpetrators, this could mean that around one in six women coaches may be avoiding a bully at any one point in time.

Harassment is much more prevalent for women coaches than men (21% compared to 12% of men). On average one in four of those women will choose to avoid locations after both harassment and aggression and violence. This is understandable given the likely greater risk to personal safety that women face. In effect, women's access to physical spaces becomes more limited.

Harm therefore has knock-on impacts beyond direct damage. It can limit women coaches' engagement and their access to space and opportunities.

## REALITY 4.4

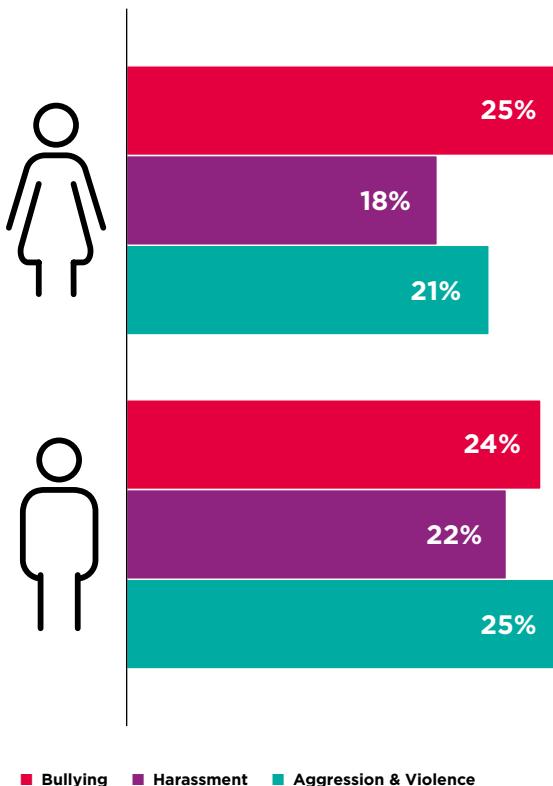
### Safeguarding systems are not serving coaches well, least of all women.

Reporting mechanisms are a cornerstone of safeguarding and accountability in sport. They provide coaches with a formal avenue to raise concerns, challenge harmful behaviours, and seek resolution. Effective reporting systems not only protect individuals but also signal an organisation's commitment to transparency and cultural change. This section explores the role of reporting within coaching environments, examining how it functions as a critical link between experiencing harm and achieving meaningful action.

#### REPORTING SYSTEMS AND PREVALENCE OF USAGE

91% of Heads of Coaching Workforce report that their organisations have a reporting system in place and in many cases offer multiple options. Clearly all organisations should have reporting systems in place. The data in Figure 4.10 illustrates that formal reporting of harmful behaviours by those who experienced harm in coaching environments is uncommon.

**Figure 4.10 - Coaches experiencing harm who utilised the reporting system in place**



GG

**I have battled most of my career with a 'lads' culture and had a big part in the investigation into failures in safeguarding in [sport], I had burnout fighting it and no longer coach full-time."**

Woman, Amateur Coach

Across those who experienced bullying, harassment, and aggression and violence, on average fewer than one in four coaches submitted a formal complaint, with women reporting at lower rates than men for harassment and aggression and violence.

The majority of coaches who experienced harm did not report it. The most common reason given for not filing a complaint across all types of harm was the belief that reporting would not make a difference. This points to a lack of trust in organisational processes and outcomes. It also reflects a culture where accountability is perceived as weak and where coaches may feel powerless to effect change. It suggests reporting is not widely seen as safe, meaningful and impactful.

#### RESPONSE TO REPORTS OF INCIDENTS OF HARM

Accountability is a critical measure of trust. It reflects whether organisations respond effectively when harm is reported and whether coaches feel their concerns are being heard and are leading to meaningful action in line with safeguarding commitments. In the absence of a robust independent investigation process, coaches may be deterred from reporting even if a reporting system is in place. This section examines perceptions of organisational responsiveness, including whether coaches received a response after raising concerns and their level of satisfaction with the outcomes.

Some coaches reported that their organisations failed to respond to complaints they had made or declined to investigate (Figure 4.11). A significantly higher proportion of women were declined an investigation. Given the higher prevalence of harms among women, and therefore reports, this means an even larger number of women coaches are being declined investigations.

**Figure 4.11 - Coaches reports of how their complaints were handled by their organisation**



**As a female coach, verbal threats, intimidation, lack of respect are a frequent occurrence... Any formal reporting seems to go nowhere and often causes more problems... We only report the most serious behaviour, but nothing comes of it."**

Woman, Grassroots Coach

Even when coaches take the difficult step of reporting harm, the process often fails to meet expectations. For the minority of coaches who do report harmful behaviours, satisfaction in the response is low. Organisations are slightly more likely to respond to a woman coach's complaint than to a man's, but significantly more likely to decline to investigate women reporting across all forms of harm. Only one in six women coaches were satisfied with the outcome of reports made around bullying and harassment and the figures are only marginally better for men. Organisations performed somewhat better when it came to responses to reports of aggression and violence; however, the majority of complainants were still dissatisfied with the outcomes.

This lack of satisfaction with reporting systems undermines trust, discourages future reporting, and perpetuates a culture where accountability is perceived as weak and harmful behaviours remain unchecked.

## REALITY 4.5

### There is a lack of trust in safeguarding systems.

Given the high levels of bullying and harassment experienced by women coaches and of aggression and violence by all coaches, the low reporting rates above indicate a lack of trust in the system. This is borne out by the data (Figure 4.11) regarding response rates, investigation rates and satisfaction with investigation outcomes.

81% of the CEOs we surveyed agreed that “staff trust that our organisation is working to eliminate any form of sexism, misogyny and aggression towards women”.

Yet when it comes to trust in reporting incidences of harm, Heads of Coaching Workforces (Figure 4.12) have some concerns. For example, only 57% of Heads of Coaching Workforces were very or quite confident that women coaches would trust the organisation to implement sanctions fairly and consistently. 32% were aware that women coaches might be worried to report an incident for fear of prejudicing their career, saying that they are only somewhat confident that this would not be the case.

**Figure 4.12 - Heads of Coaching Workforce levels of confidence in women coaches' trust in their organisation**



The reality is that many coaches do not trust the systems of their own organisation when it comes to reporting harm. Given this context, we asked CEOs for their views on the creation of an independent body for receiving and handling any complaints that arise across all sports: **45% supported the idea, 19% opposed it and 35% said they were unsure**. The main reasons given for saying ‘no’ were to avoid duplication of systems and unnecessary bureaucracy as well as a belief that they already had a robust reporting system in place. There appears to be significant support for an independent reporting system, which is more likely to encourage coaches to report harm. It would bring transparency and visibility to the scale and breadth of the problem. Unless organisations address the weaknesses of the current systems and build trust with their coaches, this problem will persist.



## REALITY 4.6

### There are inadequate policies to tackle misogyny and protect women in coaching.

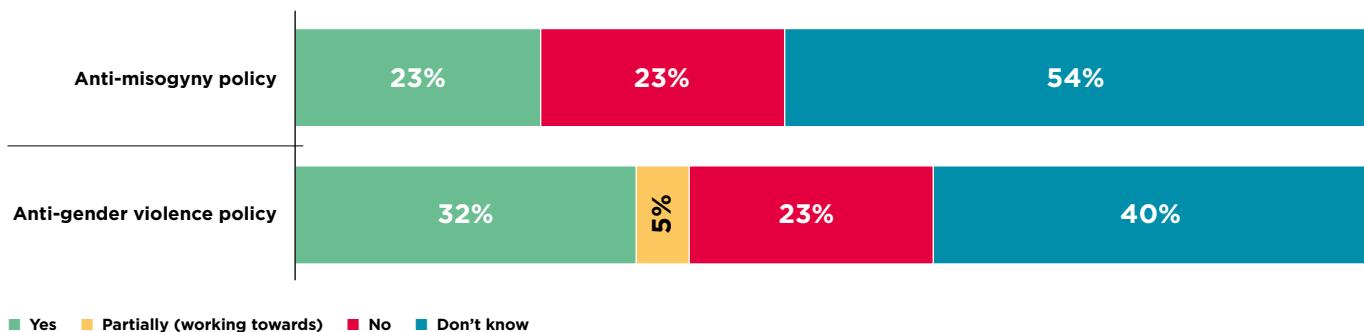
Sports organisations have a statutory duty of care (under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 as amended) to provide a safe working environment, which includes protection from psychological harm, stress and risks to their health caused by any form of harm and must take steps to prevent it from happening. There are further protections afforded by the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and the Equality Act 2010 which was designed to prevent discrimination towards those with "protected

characteristics", including sex. In keeping with this legislative context, the Heads of Coaching Workforce surveyed reported that:

- 95% have Health and Safety at Work Policies
- 95% have Safeguarding Policies
- 75% have Anti-Racism Policies

But very few have dedicated policies in place to protect women. This is of real concern given the disproportionate harm women are exposed to. It is a stark and uncomfortable reality that women coaches working across the sector lack essential protection at the policy level (Figure 4.13).

Figure 4.13 - Critical protection policies for women as reported by Heads of Coaching Workforces



**I'm just really sad that I devoted so much of my life to it and it led nowhere. At least when I was competing, I could silence all that by just beating everyone. My experiences with misogyny in coaching crushed my confidence but if I'm honest with myself I know that I was a brilliant coach with a ton of empathy and a lifetime of expertise and knowledge."**

Woman, Community Coach

23% of the Heads of Workforce reported having anti-misogyny policies and 32% anti-gender violence policies but a large proportion did not know whether such policies were in place. Given the levels of harm women coaches are exposed to, this lack of focus on misogyny will allow current norms to continue, making the sector less safe and welcoming for women. This situation is unacceptable and requires urgent attention. And yet 77% of CEOs we surveyed agreed that "Everything possible is being done to prevent women coaches from sexist, bullying, aggressive and violent behaviours towards them."



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## CONCLUSION

Bullying and harassment is highly prevalent for women in coaching (30% of women being bullied and 21% harassed), and one in five male and female coaches face aggression and violence. "Fellow coaches" are cited by women as the principal perpetrators of bullying and harassment, whereas parents are more likely to be violent or aggressive towards both male and female coaches. Harm is coming from multiple directions and when it happens, coaches are unlikely to report it.

For women, if they experience harassment, it is likely to be sexual in nature and they are much more likely to avoid the perpetrators, avoid locations or "laugh it off" than they are to report the harm. This contributes to women becoming isolated and limits their opportunities to coach. The patterns are different for aggression and violence but even then, women are more likely than men to avoid the perpetrator and less likely than men to report the harm.

The facts are stark; harm has systemic roots and presents a major challenge for sport. Most senior leaders believe they are doing all they can to protect female coaches, but persistent problems indicate that these efforts are not fully translating into effective outcomes. These findings indicate an urgent need for more action: dedicated anti-misogyny policies, more effective reporting systems, and proactive interventions that genuinely address the experiences and vulnerabilities of women coaches in particular across the sector.

Safeguarding processes need urgent investigation in the context of coaching. Safeguarding of athletes, players and particularly children is rightly given high priority by sports now but coaches deserve equal protection.



# Leading the Change: Recommendations for Action

The findings set out in the preceding chapters show a coaching workforce that is deeply committed to its work and finds coaching intrinsically rewarding, but that is operating within a system under growing strain. Alongside high levels of enjoyment and dedication, coaches describe experiences shaped by precarious employment, informal working arrangements, persistent sex discrimination and, for some, exposure to harm. Taken together, these conditions help explain why trust in parts of the coaching system has been weakened and why change is needed to support a more stable, safe and sustainable coaching environment.

These experiences are not evenly felt. Women coaches report consistently poorer conditions, and only half (51%) believe their sport is genuinely committed to gender equality in practice. At the same time, more than three quarters (77%) of Heads of Coaching Workforce acknowledge that their organisations could do more to improve gender equality in coaching. This points to a clear gap between aspiration and lived experience in coaching.

Yet, leaders across the sector are not unaware of these challenges. Most CEOs (84%) told us they are committed to gender equality, with over half describing it as a strategic priority. However, this commitment is not yet consistently reflected in governance and practice. Only 5% of CEOs reported that their board routinely discusses gender equality, just one quarter of Heads of Coaching Workforce said their organisation has an anti-misogyny policy, and only 16% of CEOs planned to ensure such policies were introduced across affiliated clubs. This uneven translation of intent into action contributes to the disconnect experienced by coaches.

Leaders in sport hold a critical responsibility to ensure that the conditions of coaching, including safety, culture, employment and progression, are actively monitored, resourced and governed. While there has been progress, governance and leadership structures remain largely male-dominated, limiting decision-making diversity and weakening visible signals of commitment to gender equity across the system.

At the same time, CEOs and Heads of Coaching Workforce also identified significant barriers to change. Limited funding and capacity, entrenched cultural attitudes, fragmented pathways and a lack of system-wide alignment were all cited as constraints, particularly in community and grassroots settings. Many leaders described feeling restricted by outdated



structures and limited influence. This insight matters: progress on gender equity is not only about intent or leadership-will, but about how the sporting system is designed and resourced to support change.

Low pay and insecure conditions are systemic issues affecting many coaches, but unequal pay, uneven access to development and greater exposure to harm are gendered realities. These patterns are not the result of individual resilience or motivation; they reflect how the system currently operates. Gender equity therefore acts as a diagnostic: where women are struggling, the system is not functioning as it should. Left unaddressed, these conditions undermine trust, retention and the long-term sustainability of coaching for everyone.

Strengthening coaching requires a dual focus: improving conditions across the system, while taking targeted action where women continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged. This research highlights where action is most needed and provides a baseline against which progress can be tracked through future engagement with coaches and leaders.

The actions that follow offer practical starting points for building a sport coaching system that is fairer, safer and more sustainable for all.



1

## Employment Landscape

### STABILISING COACHING WORK AND ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL PRECARITY

The evidence shows that coaching across the system is characterised by insecurity, low pay and limited employment protections, with women disproportionately affected. Employment precarity constrains career choice, undermines retention and increases vulnerability to harm.

#### Priority actions

- Establish clearer expectations for minimum employment standards across the coaching workforce, including pay transparency, contracts, role clarity and access to basic employment rights.
- Address gendered patterns of employment by reviewing disparities in contract type, hours and pay, particularly at key career stages.
- Support organisations, especially grassroots clubs, to improve financial viability and workforce planning, which can optimise paid and formal opportunities.
- Improve communication and awareness of parental, maternity and related rights, ensuring women are not forced out of coaching at life transition points.
- Recognise that financial instability can present a risk to positive, inclusive and safe working environments, particularly for women.



2

## Coach Development and Progression

### RESTORING AGENCY, CLARITY AND PROGRESSION IN COACHING CAREERS

The findings show that many coaches lack real choice over whether and how they progress. Career pathways are often unclear, CPD access is uneven and coaches are rarely consulted about their development needs. Women are disproportionately excluded from progression opportunities.

#### Priority actions

- Redesign coach development systems to support different career choices, not only upward progression within narrow performance pathways.
- Ensure there is fair and equal access to funded Continuing Professional Development and maximise budget allocations to reduce reliance on self-funding.
- Involve coaches, particularly women, in shaping Continuing Professional Development provision so it reflects real needs, supporting coaches' broader development as people, as well as skilled practitioners.
- Embed regular feedback and development and progression planning as standard practice, and ensure this is equally available for men and women.
- Make progression criteria and recruitment processes transparent and fair to reduce reliance on informal networks and sponsorship, ensuring gender-balanced decision-making.



## 3 | Culture and Inclusion

### BUILDING CULTURES WHERE WOMEN FEEL HEARD, VALUED AND ABLE TO BELONG

While many coaches report enjoyment and commitment to coaching, women consistently experience weaker cultures of belonging, voice and recognition. These experiences worsen at senior levels and contribute to attrition.

#### Priority actions

- Treat culture as a leadership responsibility by making inclusion, voice and belonging explicit organisational priorities.
- Deliver practical training on gender bias and inequality, equipping leaders and coaches to challenge everyday behaviours that marginalise or silence women. Normalise routine conversations about gender equality at board, leadership and workforce levels, rather than treating it as optional.
- Increase the visibility of women in leadership and decision-making roles to disrupt gendered norms around authority and expertise.
- Create structured opportunities for coaches' voices to inform decision-making, reducing marginalisation and improving trust.
- Invest in support networks for female coaches whilst inequality, precarity and lack of representation remain.



## 4 | Keeping Coaches Safe from Harm

### STRENGTHENING SAFETY, TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACROSS THE SYSTEM

The research shows that harm persists across the coaching system and in various forms, with women reporting significantly higher rates and low confidence in reporting mechanisms. Informal cultures, power imbalances and weak follow-up undermine trust.

#### Priority actions

- Strengthen safeguarding systems so they clearly apply to coaches as well as athletes/participants, including volunteers and grassroots coaches.
- Reduce power imbalances by exploring independent or external reporting mechanisms that protect those raising concerns.
- Improve organisational capability to respond to harm through training, guidance and clear accountability processes.
- Ensure that anti-misogyny and gender-based violence policies are not only in place but implemented, monitored and reviewed.
- Require organisations to demonstrate learning and improvement following incidents.

## BRINGING THE CONDITIONS TOGETHER

These four system conditions are interdependent. Progress in one area will be limited if others remain weak. Employment insecurity undermines safety; unclear career pathways affect retention; poor culture erodes safety and belonging; and weak safeguarding damages confidence and trust across the system.

Addressing these conditions together, and with a gender-informed lens, provides a realistic and evidence-based route to redesigning coaching as work that people can enter and remain in, progress through by choice, and feel fulfilled.

## WOMEN IN SPORT HEADLINE RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the evidence and recommendations set out in this chapter, Women in Sport is calling for sustained cultural reform across the sport system to improve the experiences of women coaches. Gender equity within the coaching workforce must be treated as a core priority for system sustainability, safety and fairness.

To accelerate and incentivise change, Women in Sport recommends that Sports Councils embed the following expectations within funding and accountability frameworks. As a condition of grant funding, recipients should be required to:



- 1. Introduce and implement anti-misogyny policies** at all organisational levels, supported by appropriate training.
- 2. Use gender impact reporting and gender budgeting** to identify and address disparities in pay, expenses and investment between the sexes in coach development.
- 3. Take active steps towards gender-balanced leadership**, with transparent annual reporting on the gender composition of senior leadership and the coaching workforce.
- 4. Establish and publicise independent, trusted reporting mechanisms** for coaches to report harm safely and with confidence.

While these actions are positioned as system-level levers, all organisations that employ or deploy coaches are encouraged to adopt them as part of a shared commitment to meaningful, lasting change.

# About Women in Sport and the Women in Coaching Taskforce

## ABOUT WOMEN IN SPORT

Women in Sport was founded in 1984 and its vision is that no one is excluded from the joy, fulfilment and lifelong benefits of sport. Recognising that gender stereotypes and institutional bias are holding women back in life and in sport, the charity's purpose is to create lasting positive change for women and girls in sport and society. The charity has a track record of success in securing change based on its deep understanding of the needs and aspirations of women and girls at each life stage, and its determination to break down stubborn gender inequalities through its work within the sports sector and beyond.

## ABOUT THE WOMEN IN COACHING TASKFORCE

In 2024, Women in Sport was invited to lead a taskforce to tackle one of the most stubborn gender inequalities in sport: the lack of female coaches at every level.

The 'Women in Coaching Taskforce' exists to establish a shared understanding of the most pressing issues facing coaches, create a shared narrative, and advocate for the solutions needed to transform coaching. The Taskforce is not a short-term working group concerned only with representation; it is an intervention designed to influence the conditions that underpin coaching.

The Taskforce, funded by Sport England, is supported by a 'Visionary Group' comprising sector leaders from organisations such as UK Sport, CIMPSSA, UK Coaching, professional sport, and sport-for-development agencies. The Taskforce is strengthened by critical partnerships with Leeds Beckett University, the Female Coaching Network, Women's Sport Collective, and other key stakeholders.

The Taskforce exists to drive a concerted, unapologetic effort to right one of the greatest inequalities in sport.



**The Taskforce is not a short-term working group concerned only with representation; it is an intervention designed to influence the conditions that underpin coaching.**

# Glossary of Terms

**ACTIVE COACH:**

Sport coaches who were actively coaching at the time of completing the survey.

**LAPSED COACH:**

Sport Coaches who have left coaching within the past five years.

**NGB:**

A National Governing Body (NGB) is an organisation that governs and administers a sport on a national basis, whether that is for the whole of the United Kingdom (i.e. England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales), for Great Britain (i.e. England, Scotland and Wales) or for one of the Home Countries individually.

**PROFESSIONAL CLUB:**

A professional club participates in competitive sports, where athletes, coaches, and staff are typically remunerated.

**COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS:**

Delivery of sports participation and engagement activities in a local area with a focus on enhancing health, social inclusion and inclusivity.

**GRASSROOTS:**

The foundational level of sport participation, typically made up of local clubs which provide opportunities for all ages to participate in informal or organised sport.

**TALENT PATHWAY:**

A structured, multi-stage system designed by NGBs to identify, nurture, and develop promising athletes from grassroots to elite levels.

**HIGH PERFORMANCE:**

Highest level of competition, competing on national and international stages (e.g. Olympics, Paralympics, World Championships).

**AMATEUR SPORT:**

Organised sport in which participants do not earn a living from their participation and play for enjoyment, competition, development or community involvement. It is not included in the talent pathway.

**CEOs:**

Includes Chief Executive Officers, Heads of Organisations, Senior Directors, Club or Regional Chairs, and other equivalent leadership roles within sport governance.

**HEAD OF COACHING WORKFORCE:**

Includes managers with responsibility for the coaching workforce (e.g. Head of Operations, Coaching Manager, Head of Coaching, Director of Coaching Development).

**BULLYING:**

Bullying refers to the repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. Bullying can be physical, verbal or psychological. It can happen face-to-face or online.

**HARASSMENT:**

Harassment is conduct that makes a person feel threatened, humiliated, distressed, or fearful of violence.

**DISCRIMINATION:**

Discrimination occurs when an individual or group of people is treated unfairly because of personal characteristics and/or attributes.

**AGGRESSION & VIOLENCE:**

Aggression and/or violence includes abuse, threats, or assault related to coaching and can come from anywhere, including athletes, fellow coaches, and members of the public.

**EQUITY:**

The quality of being fair and just, especially in a way that takes account of and seeks to address existing inequalities.

**EQUALITY:**

Providing equal opportunities to everyone and protecting people from being discriminated against.

**DIVERSITY:**

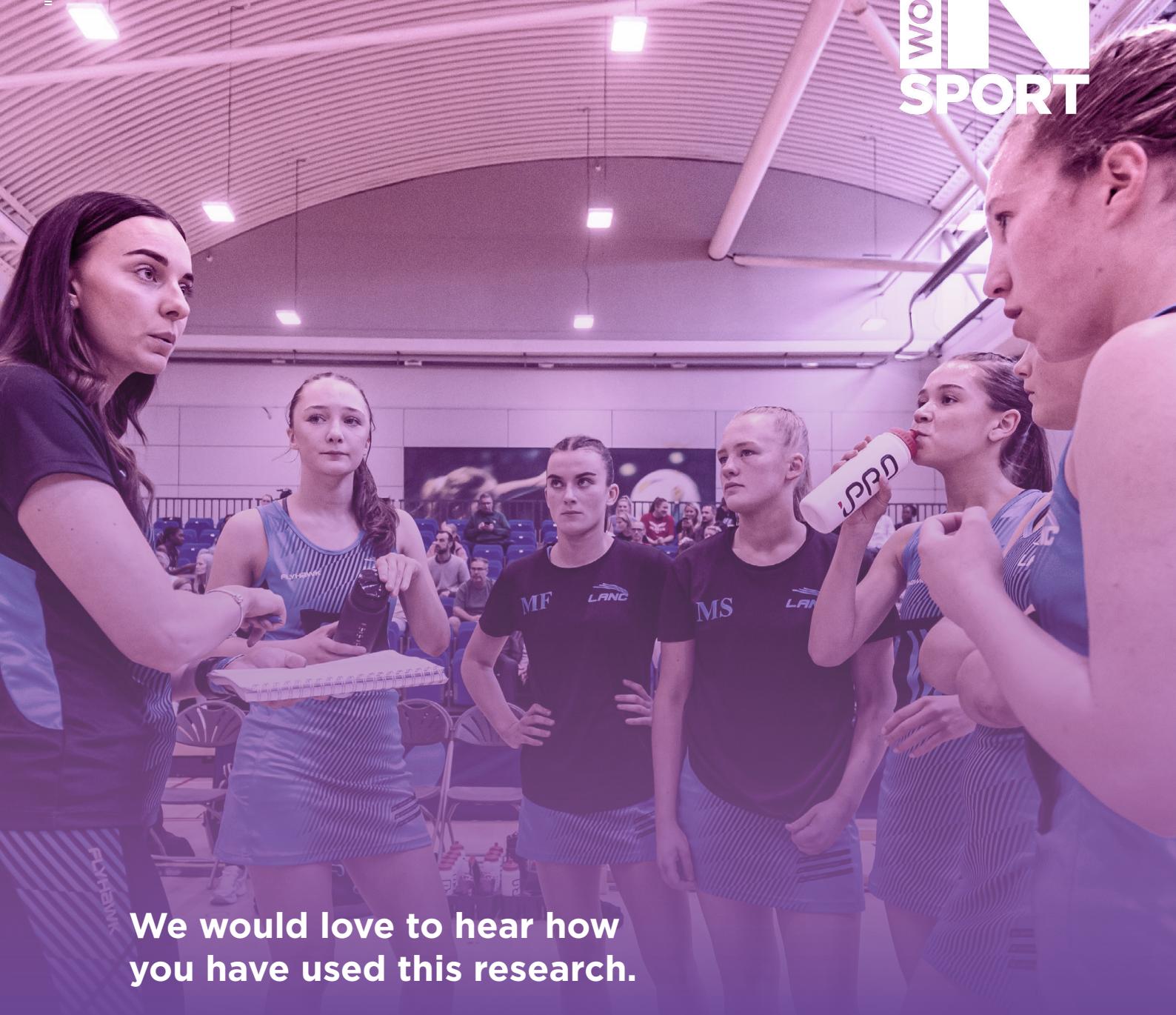
The protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

**MISOGYNY:**

Prejudice, contempt, or hostility toward women because they are women.

**SEXISM:**

The actions people take, or fail to take, that discriminate against a person based on their sex.



**We would love to hear how you have used this research.**

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